



Addie

Mail Order Brides of Wichita Falls

CYNDI RAYE

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Miss Addie

by

Cyndi Raye

Mail Order Brides of Wichita Falls
The Last Chapter...

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For all of you, my readers, who love Miss Addie and the folks of
Wichita Falls!

Chapter 1

“Here it is! Right here on the front page!”

Miss Addie leaned over the table, her chin in the air as dark eyes flashed at the words in front of her and the black and white photo of the house almost directly across the street from her own boarding house. It sat beside Doc James and Nurse Ellie’s place. She tried to tell herself it didn’t matter when she saw his name in bold black letters on the front cover of the Wichita Falls Gazette. Inside, her stomach churned like a slab of butter being smashed around and around in a huge circle.

She took in a soft breath. “He can’t be serious?”

Ruby nodded. “I’m afraid he is, Aunt Addie. You should’ve nabbed him up years ago.” Her sweet niece shook her head before picking up the tea kettle and pouring each of them a cup. As Ruby poured the hot liquid, fine bone china rattled as the delicate cup was placed on the saucer. Addie stared at the brim, its gold trim reflecting off the light that bounced from the glass window. The sun was bright today, its rays streaming through, brightening the area where so many former brides and guests sat at the table in Miss Addie’s dining room.

Late summer in Wichita Falls was warm but the humidity was always low. Even so, Addie felt a trickle of sweat along her hairline. She took a cloth napkin and delicately wiped at her temple.

Her niece watched, amused. “I’m sure this news causes you discomfort, dear Aunt. Every single day for the rest of your life you will have the pleasure of seeing the man you love and rejected many times living almost straight across from you. How in the world will

you deal with that?"

"The way you say it sounds as if I'll be suffering!" Addie's chin lifted a little higher. "How do you know it won't be Max who will suffer at the thought he moved on without me?"

Ruby shook her head, placing the china cup in front of her mouth.

"You don't have to hide the smirk I see on your face, young lady!"

Ruby let out a rather boisterous giggle. She set the cup down to reach out and place a soft hand over her aunts. "Oh, Aunt Addie! Why don't you march on over there and tell him how you feel?"

I will do no such thing!"

"He has retired from his foreman position at the Montgomery Ranch."

Addie nodded, clasping her hands together. A nervous rumble began in her lower belly and she had no idea why. "Max did mention he wanted to retire sometime in the future. I didn't realize it would be so soon."

"Or, without any warning," Ruby added, nodding as if she was so aware of Addie's exact feelings.

Addie had to admit her niece was right. "I'm afraid this news has taken me quite by surprise. I thought everything between Max and I was moving along quite well. He arrives in town each Saturday to spend the day with me before having to go back to the ranch. We spend the whole day and evening together. I can't believe he hasn't told me of these plans." She pointed to the article in the newspaper.

Ruby glared. "How can you say that, Aunt Addie! He's been wanting to marry you since you started this boarding house all those years ago!"

A sad memory flashed in her mind. "I can still remember the day he asked for my hand in marriage. We were standing at the waterfall at the edge of town and I was so happy to become his wife. Then the worst thing possible happened and I didn't see him again for seven long years."

She felt the vortex pulling her back to a time when things were crazy and hectic as the town of Wichita Falls was in the early stages of growing.

“You can say he went to prison, Addie. Everyone in town knows he did time back then. No one cares anymore. It’s in the past. The only one who cared was you. He came back after seven long years away, still asking for your hand. Why you didn’t accept, I’ll never understand.”

She heard the frustration in her niece’s voice. “It was different in those days, Ruby. The town was young. With the help of some of the elders of this town, we turned it around and it grew to be what you see today. We were sending outlaws and criminals away, much like we do now when someone gets out of hand.”

“What did it matter? Max loved you. He did his time so he could put his sins of running with the outlaw gang in the past and move on. He did it so he was able to marry you without ever worrying he’d be taken away.”

A stab of guilt flashed in Addie’s eyes. Ruby was staring right at her and she flinched. Addie didn’t want to, but she always owned up to her part no matter what. “You are so right, my smart niece. I have plenty of regret about that day, more than you’ll ever know.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Addie. I don’t mean to bring up the past and make you sad. I find it so hard to believe you gave up a love like his for this town.”

She sighed. “I made a decision I thought was the right one. I truly believe the Lord showed me there was a bigger picture than myself. There was no one else in this town willing to take on the responsibilities I had. What in the world would’ve happened to all of you ladies and the ones before had I not intervened?”

Ruby nodded. “It is true. You’ve saved so many women from a fate worse than death many times over. We do appreciate all you’ve done.”

“It was my duty and my calling. I’m afraid if I’d have married Max back then, my stature as an upstanding citizen of this town would not have been credible. Someone would have brought up the fact I was married to a convict. It was a different time, Ruby.”

“What about now, Addie? Have you ever given a thought to giving up the boarding house and matchmaking business and live your own life? Let someone else take over? You deserve some happiness.”

Addie closed her eyes and smiled. "Perhaps."

"You truly have? I must say I'm shocked! Tell me, please?" Ruby scooted closer to her aunt. An expectant look in her eyes had Addie opening up and spilling her thoughts for the first time in years.

"I wish your mama was here, Ruby. I miss her so much. You remind me of her with those beautiful eyes that are just like hers. She was so fascinated with life here in Wichita Falls. Your eyes are like hers were, they're filled with so much hope."

"I'm taking that as a compliment. At least she was able to live much longer knowing I was happy and gave her some grandchildren."

Addie picked up the neatly folded cloth napkin and dabbed at the corner of her eye. It always made her sad to think about Rosemarie. She knew how much her sister wanted to come back here after Ruby grew up, but her sickness wouldn't allow her to travel. When they had lost her last year, part of her heart broke in two. "We did the right thing to go back to New York and attend her service. My parents never attended, claiming to be too old and feeble. Or my brother, he never showed up as well."

Ruby giggled. "He was in jail, Aunt Addie. It would've been impossible for him."

Her words brought a smile to Addie's face. "It felt so good to know he was behind bars, I have to admit this. He caused your mama so much anguish. She'd be happy to know his gambling ways finally caught up to him. But having you leave there was the best thing that happened to this family. Look at you, Ruby, several children and a wonderful husband."

Ruby beamed. "And a ranch twice the size of normal ranches in the area that keeps growing bigger each year."

"Except for the Ward Ranch."

"Someday the Montgomery Ranch may buy more land and become bigger than even the Ward Ranch."

Addie laughed. "You have grit and determination, Ruby. I don't doubt you one bit. Now, read me the news article."

Addie steepled her fingers as she waited for Ruby to begin reading. Her heart raced. Was this truly the end of her and Max? Was he

moving on? She wanted to hang her head and let the tears flow but she'd never let anyone see her true emotions in public. Not even her niece. Tears never got her a darn thing.

Ruby took a sip of tea and cleared her throat. "The headline reads: *Montgomery Ranch Foreman To Retire and Settle Down. Can We Expect A Wedding Soon?* by Charity Ashwood."

Addie clutched her hands together. Pushing her shoulders back, she let out a deep sigh. "Go on, keep reading," she ordered when Ruby stopped.

"Max Anderson, the long standing foreman of the Montgomery Ranch has informed this reporter his days of hard work is coming to an end. He's announced his retirement as foreman and has purchased a house in Wichita Falls beside Doc James and Nurse Ellie's place. When asked if he was planning on settling down, he gave me a smile and a wink and informed everyone within hearing distance that he plans to get himself a bride by the end of next month! This is exciting news for the town! A wedding is always welcomed here!"

The whole town has known for some time of his lasting courtship with another long standing citizen and matriarch of Wichita Falls. When asked directly if the proposed bride is such person, Max Anderson refused to answer. He tipped his hat knowingly. His last words were, 'You will find out soon enough.' Will the wedding of the season stay a mystery for long?"

Addie wasn't sure how to react. Was this a game Max played with her? Was he trying to manipulate her into marrying him? For the last few years when he'd ask for her hand, she'd refused, noting how their lives were so different. She had the boarding house and matchmaking service and he had the ranch. He lived in a small cabin there. It was too far to run her business out of. She had been insistent they hold off until something changed. "I believe he is trying to coerce me into marrying him."

"What a way to do so through a news article. Why doesn't he just ask?"

Addie shifted in her seat. "He has."

"Aunt Addie, no! You refused him, didn't you? How many times has he asked for your hand in marriage?"

She fidgeted, something Addie never did. “Well, here of late he’d ask every time we were together.”

“Every Saturday? Addie, how long have you been refusing him?”

She shrugged. “It feels like the last twenty years.”

“Oh, dear! I hope you didn’t push him away.”

Addie had to admit that Ruby’s suggestion that she may have pushed Max away gave her pause.

Ruby stood when there was a knock on the door. “That must be Billy and the children. We’ll talk again soon, Auntie. Please reconsider Max’s offer. You know, I hate to say this to you as I respect you so much, but, you are not getting any younger. Don’t you want someone to hold hands with and sit on the porch with in your advanced years?”

Addie shook her head. “I’m not that old yet, dear. I’ve got many years ahead of me!” Even though it seemed as if she’d lived a long, long time. She’d been helping to build this town since she was a young woman. It hadn’t been easy work, but she’d spent many years laboring and fighting for the women of Wichita Falls. Was it now time to let someone else follow in her footsteps?

Ruby stopped at the front door, her hand on the knob. She turned. “We don’t know how long we have now, do we? You taught me that, Auntie. If I hadn’t taken your advice a long time ago, I might not have what I have today. I may have left this town and everything I had grown to love. Now, look what awaits me!” She flung open the door to a tall young man and two small children.

It brought a smile to Addie’s face. Billy was almost grown. He had been a rag tag ten year old when Ruby got off the train that day so long ago. He was Ruby’s husband Marshall’s unsupervised and naughty nephew, hiding Ruby’s land certificates from her.

Addie walked to the door, watching as Ruby and her family marched to the wagon that had pulled up out front. Marshall tipped his hat to her. She lifted her hand and waved. Billy helped the children into the back and Ruby jumped up on the seat before her husband was able to assist her. Addie shook her head. Ruby had always been stubborn, trying to do things on her own. *It must run in the family.*

She was just getting ready to close the front door when a woman scurried up the sidewalk and called out. "Miss Addie! Do you have a moment?"

Dread filled her when she realized it was Charity Ashwood. It wasn't that she didn't want to visit with Charity. She loved her dearly. Addie knew the reason she was here. "I'll be heading out soon, dear. Can you call on me later today?" At least then she'd have her wits about her. Getting the news of Max's retirement and plans still had her reeling. She didn't want to face the town's reporter yet.

Charity hurried up to her, closing in like the excellent reporter she had become over the years. "Oh please, Miss Addie. I need to see you right away. Did you see the newspaper?"

Addie had watched Charity grow from an unsure newswoman to an excellent reporter that would never take no for an answer. Addie had been so proud of Charity's accomplishments. She didn't think the woman would turn on her though. "Ruby was here. She read me the story. I don't see what else needs said."

"I'd love some tea. I've been on the run all morning." Charity stood poised and beautiful, unmoved by the fact Addie had told her she was heading out soon.

Addie swung the door open wider. "You may as well come in then. I'd hate for you to camp out on my porch until I'm ready to speak to you." Which was more likely to happen than not. Wichita Falls only newswoman was so determined to be the one to get the whole story no matter what!

Charity leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you!"

It probably wouldn't hurt to find out exactly what Charity knew about Max's plans. Maybe she heard something that wasn't put in the paper.

Chapter 2

“Let’s get a cup of tea and sit on the porch,” Miss Addie suggested. As they worked in the kitchen and waited for the water to reheat, it felt wonderful to catch up with Charity. She had come here as a meek and mild reporter, after leaving Chicago with determination to build her career without men trying to intimidate her. She was another success story in Addie’s long list of bride matches.

When they were settled on the front porch, Charity turned to her. “Now, I’d like to get your opinion. What do you think Max is doing buying a house right across from your own boarding house?”

Miss Addie struggled to stay poised and answer in short, curt replies. She wasn’t going to give this town the satisfaction of knowing she was horribly worried that he was moving on without her. She gave Charity a forced all-knowing smile. “I’m sure Max is making plans for a comfortable life away from the ranch and since we get together every Saturday, its the perfect place for him to be in his retirement.”

Charity wasn’t going to stop at that simple answer. She didn’t even bother to write it down. As a matter of fact, Charity wasn’t holding her pencil and paper like she normally did. “Miss Addie? Why not stay in the cabin on the Montgomery land? Off the record, I’ll inform you that Montgomery told Max he’d have a place there forever if he wanted.”

Miss Addie’s heart began to beat out of control. “Well, I’m sure he’d want to keep busy after retirement. It’s probably why he bought a

house in town.”

Charity shook her head. She leaned in. “Like I said, this is off the record, but I feel like I need to tell you some of the things I heard. You may want to take charge like you always do and put a stop to the rumors!”

“What rumors? I usually know about rumors before they start.”

“Not this time. The people of Wichita Falls are deliberately keeping something from you. Something that may upset you so much they are afraid to tell you.”

Now she was concerned, although her facial expression stayed the same. Everyone always told Addie everything. Since the day she made herself responsible for this town, she was on top of any shenanigans going on here. How did she miss the fact people were hiding something from her? “Well, go on. You may as well tell me now that you have me curious.”

Charity mumbled under her breath and sighed. “Alright, I’ll tell you. Max said he plans to be married by the end of the month since you refused him again on Saturday night last. He doesn’t want to be alone anymore, so he hired a mail order bride of his own.”

Addie’s face fell. The china cup clattered to her lap as her fingers shook with rage. “He did what?” It came out in a furious whisper.

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you. Everyone was afraid to mention this. You have to admit, Miss Addie, we all love you, but there comes a time when a decision has to be made.”

She stared at the house across the street, her brow furrowed and her mind confused. “He’d hire a mail order bride and put her directly across the street from me? Impossible! Max is not that cruel. I think this is a farce, made up to convince me to marry him!”

A tear plopped out of Charity’s eye. “Oh, Miss Addie, I wish that were the case, but I heard him myself. Knowing what I overheard, I can’t just let Max do this to you!”

“My Goodness, Charity! I should be crying, not you!” She was on the verge of tears but wasn’t about to let anyone see the struggle to hold it inside. “Besides, he may be spreading this awful rumor so I say yes to his demands.”

Charity shook her head. "I can attest he isn't spreading rumors. This is difficult for me to bring you this news. You've been my supporter from day one. You've also been there for all of the brides who still live in Wichita Falls and beyond. You helped carve this town into what it is today. That's why I can't sit here and let Max do this to you!"

As always, Addie became the one to provide a calming atmosphere and sanctuary for hurt souls. But, who would calm her soul? "I wouldn't get too upset, my dear. I'm sure he won't go through with this farce."

Charity shook her head. "I'm pretty sure he has his mind made up. I was at the Montgomery Ranch the other day finishing up my questions on the article in today's paper. I had stopped at the barn to make a few notes before I'd forget. Max was speaking with his boss and I don't believe either of them knew I was still there. I heard the whole conversation."

Addie gave her a disapproving look. "No good can come of eavesdropping, Charity. Are you sure he didn't say these things knowing you were close by?"

"He thought I was inside visiting Ruby. I went up to the house to see her, but she had already gone to the creek with the children, so I back-tracked to ask a few more questions. I stopped right inside the door of the barn when I heard them talking. They never knew I was there since I ran out before they saw me."

Addie noticed how distressed Charity seemed having to tell her this news. Usually, the news reporter was calm and demure, but today she was not herself. She knew that Max would try anything to convince her to marry him, and thought at first he put the newswoman up to this nonsense.

Addie didn't think Charity would go to such lengths to make this up, especially to help Max. She wanted to believe Charity, but as always, Addie was a cautious woman. "Don't worry yourself so, Charity. It's my own fault this has happened."

"He told Ruby's husband he waited years for you to say yes and was getting too old to keep begging."

Addie growled. "He didn't have to keep begging me. After a firm no,

maybe he should've gotten the hint."

"I suppose you are right. You have stayed adamant that you didn't want to marry. Although, sometimes I wonder if it's just from saying no so many times that you can't form the word yes."

"That's ridiculous. I can say yes. It just wasn't the right time is all." Addie had much to think about. She stood, then realized something. She turned to Charity, who was rising from the bench. "How did he order a mail order bride? I am the only matchmaker in Wichita Falls."

"Why, he went to Mill Ridge."

"Or, so he says. There is only one way to find out! Good day, Charity." In Miss Addie style, she removed herself from the porch and went inside to prepare for a round-about trip to Mill Ridge. She'd go see Emma and find out if Max was trying to deceive her once and for all.

It didn't take long to search for the truth. Emma opened the door and insisted she have some tea. Addie had honestly drank enough tea for one day, but protocol bade her to be polite. The boarding house in Mill Ridge was owned by Addie also. She had bought it when the sheriff had dragged out the riff-raff and turned the town into what it is today. Just like Wichita Falls, it had been a haven for outlaws and troublemakers at one time.

Sheriff Nightingale had changed that. The town of Wichita Falls had helped, along with the many women who had become mail-order brides thanks to Addie's agency. She was proud of all she'd accomplished.

But, she was tired.

Weary.

Was it because Max had offered her something else? Was he willing to take her in her old age and love her like she'd never been loved before? He had been asking her to marry him for years. She had always shrugged him off, telling him it wasn't the right time. Maybe someday she would. Was he trying to convince her to change her mind about marriage to him by making her jealous? He'd never went

to these extremes before.

She was about to find out the truth.

Emma set a tray on the table and readied their cups. “How are you, Miss Addie? I’m so glad you stopped in. It’s been quite busy these past few days. I’ve had lots of activity with the mail order business. I’ve gotten so many letters recently it will take me all week to go through.”

“Oh? That’s good news. Tell me all about it.”

Emma sat down across from her at the table. She took her hand and smoothed the doily in the center. Mostly, Emma had a calm demeanor. Today she seemed a bit nervous. Was she a part of this farce? Because Addie had not gotten this far in life taking everything at face value and she was about to call Max’s bluff.

Until she heard the words that rolled from Emma’s tongue.

“I’m nervous to mention this since I know you were a companion to him at one time.”

“Are you speaking of Max?” Of course she was.

Emma nodded.

“Well, go on. Spit it out.”

Emma sighed deeply. Perhaps too deeply. It was a dramatic flair known to worry the recipient of bad news. Addie waited.

“Max sent for a mail order bride.”

Since she had already heard this from Charity, she stared at Emma, causing the poor woman to become more nervous than ever. Had Max talked her into going along with this, too? “Oh? Well, I’m not surprised. He has been wanting to get married for a long, long time.”

Emma had been with Addie for a long time. She wasn’t interested in becoming a mail order bride, preferring to run the boarding house instead. Emma had proven to be a smart business woman.

Addie had been thinking of relinquishing some of her property at some point. Maybe now was the time to do so, knowing Emma would become a proud and sufficient owner.

If Max was making such an effort to involve others in this game, then perhaps she’d marry him after all and settle down with the man. But first she had to see what shenanigans he was good for.

“I’ll show you the bride that he chose.”

“What?” Addie didn’t think he’d go that far. How dare he bring an innocent woman here to turn her away when Addie changed her mind. That was unacceptable, especially since Addie had worked so hard making her establishment a top-notch agency.

Emma gave her a smile. “Don’t worry, Miss Addie. I’ve assured him that the mail order bride would be a favorable match. He’s accepted Miss Marlowe Ganterbolt and she should be here by the end of the week.” Emma picked up an envelope from the side table and handed it to Addie.

She almost refused it, but her fingers would not allow that. She opened the envelope to find a photograph of a mature woman with a flawless complexion and strong features. Well dressed, her hair perfect. She was staring right into the camera and it seemed like she was staring down Addie. As if Addie wasn’t good enough for Max. Where did that silly idea come from?

Addie stared back. The woman was certainly going to be a challenge. If she was real. It occurred to Addie that Max was either trying to wear her down or he was truly going to make another woman his bride.

She certainly couldn’t blame him. He had been asking her for years. They had been in a comfortable relationship all that time. At least it had been satisfying for her. Inside, her gut instinct told her that he hadn’t been happy and he never would be unless he had her hand in marriage.

Now, she knew she had to make a choice that would change the world as she knew it. Because there was no way her Max was going to share the house across the street with anyone else besides Addie!

She stood. “Thank you, Emma. I’m sure Max will be very happy with your choice.” She lifted her chin in the air. “I’m going to be selling this boarding house in the near future. Would you like to consider buying it from me?”

Emma was taken completely by surprise. Her eyes widened and she gave a nervous smile. “I’d love to own this. But, I’m afraid I don’t have enough money saved to do so.”

“I’ll have the solicitor write up an agreement and terms that you can afford. You do well here, making a nice profit. We can close the deal by the end of the month, will that suit?”

“I, yes. Uh, this is quite a shock, Miss Addie. Are you certain?”

“I’m more than certain. I’d like to wrap it up by the month’s end since I’ll be doing some traveling then.”

Emma looked even more surprised. “Traveling? Where are you going?”

Miss Addie shrugged. She gave Emma a cool smile before slipping out the front door. “I believe the fictional character Phileas Fogg had a wonderful idea of traveling around the world in one-hundred-eighty days. I’ve been in Wichita Falls for so long, perhaps it’s time for me to see what is truly out there.”

Emma’s jaw was still hanging as Miss Addie looked back to wave goodbye. She smiled. Oh yes, she was certain there was no mail order bride. Emma may be in on the scheme, too. Even if there was one coming, there would not be for long.

Chapter 3

Jenna's Café

“How long do you suppose it will take until Addie comes to her senses?”

It was a legitimate question. Unfortunately, Max wasn't sure how to answer. His insides were twirling and tugging at him like never before. If this plan didn't work, the love of his life would be lost to him forever. If that was the case, he'd walk away from Wichita Falls and never look back.

It had to work.

He was tired.

Weary.

Max let out air from his chest. “I hope she'll come to her senses before the end of the month. She's a smart lady. By now, she has suspicions, I'm sure.”

Heads bobbed in agreement. The café was so crowded that if Miss Addie walked through the front doors right now she'd know there was something amiss. Luckily, Charity saw him at the mercantile and told him Addie went to Mill Ridge to check out the story about the mail order bride. At least they had some time until she returned.

That's when everyone decided to meet at Jenna's café to discuss their nicely laid out plans. Max was worried Addie would find out the whole town was in on this and he wasn't sure how she'd react to that. Betrayal? That's why it was so important to keep her blind-sighted somehow. He figured she'd be all wound up with the idea of a mail

order bride coming to replace her, and wouldn't pay much attention to anything else.

That would give him enough time to plan this extravagant wedding she was not going to be able to refuse. With everyone working together, he was going to show her the whole town was rooting for the two of them to get married. He hated to deceive her but he had to trigger something to make her realize it was time. He was not going to wait for another no.

Jenna and her brother Harley were in the kitchen leaning over the counter on occasion trying to listen while fixing plates of food. No one ever walked into the café, not even for a meeting, without ordering some of the delicious fare. If Max hadn't been so worried about Addie's reaction, he'd probably be placing one himself. But, food was the last thing he wanted right now.

Leila, Harley's wife and one of the servers at the café, was walking from table to table offering to refresh cups of coffee. Max lifted his cup when she stopped by his table.

Ruby and Charity sat at one table along with Grace and Hannah, who came to town to help them. Most of the ladies Addie had helped at one time were in the café, all sitting in front of him, waiting for him to speak up. Grace's husband, Dawson Sloan, owned the Land and Title Company in Wichita Falls. Their two little ones sat upon Grace's lap, one on each knee while they played quietly with a wooden toy.

Hannah was married to the the wealthiest man in the area, the son of Byron Ward. They lived about a mile from town on one of the finest ranches in all of Texas. Byron had been a cattle rustler and caused the town a lot of grief, but his son had made up for the man's crimes. Hanna had been the perfect match for him.

Even the town drunk, Nate Jones, had showed up. When the front door opened and the whoosh of air penetrated the room as the bright red skirts came through first, everyone knew Lily Sloan had arrived. Her steps were like a dance across the floor as she whirled in on her husband's arm. Ben was always dressed in his best suit since he owned the finest hotel in Wichita Falls. The two of them made their way to the back of the room quietly and yet their loud entrance was no

surprise to anyone.

Max looked around to make sure everyone had arrived. It had been a last minute meeting, but this town and everyone in it didn't hesitate when he put out a call to meet here this morning. Doc James and his wife, Nurse Ellie sat at one table, ignoring everyone and eating plates of food they ordered. They had their hands full being the only doctor in town, so this was a nice reprieve for them to actually sit down and eat something instead of rushing around all day.

"You going to sit there looking stupid all day, son? I'm going to have to get back to the mercantile sooner or later," Jim Wheeler called out. "I can't dally here all day, it's costing me a fortune." The older man was constantly in fear of losing a penny.

Max looked around as more eyes watched him, waiting for him to speak. The sheriff and his wife Rebecca walked in and stood right inside the door.

Max cleared his throat and stood. He didn't hesitate but got right down to business. "I plan to marry Addie come hell or high-water by the month's end. I appreciate all of you offering to lend a hand. So far she saw the article that Charity wrote up in the newspaper and knows I bought the house beside Doc James and Nurse Ellie. She's not too happy."

Everyone in the room chuckled. They knew Miss Addie well. She didn't put up with nonsense. "Well, you are trying to trick the smartest woman in the world. I'd say she's going to run you out of town, old timer!"

Max grunted at the shop owner's remark. She may try to do that. He wasn't sure about anything anymore but had to give this one last try. "If I can't have the hand of the woman I love, she may as well run me out of town."

The room got quiet.

The sheriff's wife, Rebecca, came to his rescue. "We won't let her, Max. This marriage has been a long time coming. You both deserve each other. Miss Addie has helped too many people over the years and we are all grateful however she stepped into our lives. She has no idea she deserves to be happy as well, because she has trained her mind to

believe she has to help others and put herself last. I'll personally do whatever it takes to make her see reason."

"Here, here!" Everyone in the room cheered.

Max put up his hand to silence the crowd. "I want to thank everyone ahead of time for pulling together like this and helping me. I am not deserving of such a wonderful woman or of such friends as all of you."

The sheriff stepped forward. "That's not true, Max. You've lived in this town all these years and watched over her. I'd say you are worthy of each other. She needs to have her head examined if she doesn't marry you."

Max retorted. "Maybe so, Sheriff Montana. This has to work. Addie has been thinking of retiring from the matchmaking business since the brides coming out west these days has slowed some. She said between her business and Mill Ridge, she'd rather give the work to Emma and just run the boarding house."

"What will we do for brides? There are still good men here looking to marry," someone asked.

"Most of the women marry by proxy, which has become more popular these days and she's not fond of that idea. Ever since she mentioned it, I've been pushing her to step down from her role here. It's not that she doesn't want to, she doesn't know how."

Ruby stood. "Max is right. My aunt has lived all of her life giving to this town. She does not know how to take from it. We have to show her that we are all behind her. It's up to each one of us to help her let go of a role she has played for far too long."

Pastor Connors stood, his wife rising when he did. She stood a step behind him, a placid smile on her face. Her eyes, usually downcast, were looking at Max with clarity. She gave him hope and encouragement with just one look.

Max stood tall. "Thank you, everyone. I'm sure Addie will forgive each one of us for partaking in this scheme to bring her to her senses. She is in Mill Ridge right now to see if my announcement of hiring a mail order bride is true. Emma, the proprietress of the boarding house there, is in on the plan as well. Now, all we have to do is wait for

Marlowe Ganterbolt to arrive, or for Addie to say yes, whichever comes first. Either way, Marlowe should be here some time this afternoon. Since it is Saturday, I'll still be spending the evening with Addie unless she decides otherwise." He sighed deeply then ran a hand over his brow.

"Don't worry, Max. If she don't marry you, I will." The whole place roared with laughter, it was a wonder the walls and ceiling didn't shake loose. Nate Jones, the town drunk, was at it again. There for awhile, the man had cleaned up his act, but it looked like a sober life was not to be. Max wondered if he even heard a word that was said.

Addie dressed extra special knowing Max would soon be here. She had hurried back from Mill Ridge earlier knowing they would be spending the evening together like they always did. Every single Saturday from the day he got off the train all those years ago were spent together. That's why the sudden announcement of his retirement and the news of a mail order bride took her by surprise. Why hadn't he spoken to her about this before it went public?

She knew why. He was determined to win her heart through jealousy. Didn't he know that he already had it; lock, stock and barrel? Why did a piece of paper mean anything? They were in a relationship that was unusual for this day and age, she knew.

Ruby was probably right. Addie didn't know how to say yes. She had been refusing him for so many years for the sake of the town of Wichita Falls that she didn't even know how to form the word on her lips. Carefully tucking a strand of hair under her hat, she took another look in the mirror before proceeding to put on a pair of white lace gloves.

The blue dress she wore was much brighter than anything she had previously worn before in Max's presence. This attire was a bit risqué for her wardrobe, but she wanted to make a statement. There was plenty of lace along the bodice that made her feel quite feminine. If he was going to try to make her jealous, then she'd give the man something to think about!

No woman was coming into her town to take her man. Not that there was really anyone coming. Addie knew that Marlowe Ganterbolt was real since there was an actual photograph, but she wasn't a choice for Max. It was all a scam to force Addie's hand.

To be perfectly honest, Addie hadn't felt this alive in years. The emotions running through her today were different than ever before.

She always looked forward to their Saturday evenings together, but their lives had been quite ordinary for a long time. It had become a routine for the two to meet and spend an evening by each others side. It was nice. Ordinary.

After learning about Marlow, the mail order bride, her stomach had been in knots all day. Ever since she came back from Mill Ridge, she'd been nervous. Addie had been full of herself. The possibility that Max may turn to someone else had never occurred to her in all these years.

It was a bit prideful of her to assume such a thing. Max was a man. She thought he'd always be with her. Yet, today, learning about this mail order bride had somehow pulled her out of her stubborn thinking.

Addie had been so caught up in the way Max always made her feel so loved and cherished when they were together. Now, she realized if Max was going to this extreme to open her eyes, had the thought truly occurred to him to find someone else if she refused him again?

It scared the daylights out of Addie.

She gave the mirror one last look.

Turning her head, she began to march out the door and down the sidewalk. She had one last stop to make before meeting Max at Jenna's Café. They liked to share a meal together and since it was always late when Max arrived from the ranch, she'd fallen into a routine to meet him there. She still had thirty minutes to get there.

That's why her eyes widened and her mouth dropped to her jaw as she made her way to the train depot and saw Max strolling arm in arm with the woman in the photograph!

Max tried to speak without moving his mouth. "Just pretend you

are so excited to be here,” he told Marlowe.

She turned to look at his face. “You are going to regret this, I’m sure. Addie does not look like a woman to trifle with.”

“I’m sorry, sis, I don’t mean to put you in this position, but I did buy you a house!”

“What you did is blackmail, brother. Although, I believe I will call you Maxie, darling, just to pay you back for never telling the woman you love you have a sister.”

He shrugged. “You can’t call me Maxie. Now, behave, here she comes. I’ll explain everything later.”

When he turned and left the train depot with his sister, he wasn’t expecting to see Addie walking towards them. The shock on her face was priceless. Her jaw dropped at first, then she closed her mouth while a more determined look began to appear. She pushed her shoulders back and began to march towards the two.

No one else would ever know Addie as well as Max did. Even though she appeared stoic and unmoved by Marlowe’s presence, she was horrified. There was a small twitch on her left eyelid that always told on her. Max had been the only one to get close enough to her to know this sign.

He had prepared himself mentally for this meeting about a week ago. Knowing it had to happen to prompt her hand, he wasn’t enjoying it as much as he thought he would. The startled look on her face meant she was hurting. He never, ever wanted to hurt her. His job as far as he was concerned was to cherish Addie and make her happy. Not upset her like he knew was happening right now.

Maybe he was wrong in doing this. If the woman didn’t want to marry him, why did he continue to bother asking her? Even some of the men in town had asked him over and over again why he stuck around when she kept refusing his hand.

He didn’t know the answer to that question. But, he felt as if something was stirring inside him right now that was shaking up their ordinary Saturday night dinners together. Max had been feeling hopeless for a long time, like if he didn’t do something, he’d go to his grave never knowing her as his wife.

This was it for him. He was exhilarated and scared to death. It had to work. Besides, he hadn't felt like this in a long, long time. There was something stirring in his soul and he liked that feeling.

He wanted Addie to know the same thing. Would she open her heart?

Right now, she looked like she'd rather clobber him on the head with a cast iron pan!

Chapter 4

He stood facing the woman he loved. His sister, looking quite smug with her arm squeezed through his own, leaned in closer. She gave Addie a huge smile. “Hello!”

Addie was a tall woman with dark hair placed neatly in a bun with every detail perfect except for a strand that continuously fell from her carefully groomed hair. She looked absolutely gorgeous. He was always pushing that fly-away strand behind her ear and he ached to do so now.

Instead of wearing the practical gown she always donned, she had on a brightly colored blue dress, along with white lace gloves that covered her beautiful skin. A hat adorned her head, the lace trim peppering the brim, with the exact same design matching her gloves.

He inwardly was pleased. She had dressed extra carefully for their evening together. This was the first time he came into contact with her since she had returned from Mill Ridge. Since she heard about Marlowe. He looked into her eyes, but Addie was deliberately avoiding his gaze.

Instead, she looked right at Marlowe and held out her gloved hand. “Hello. You must be Miss Ganterbolt. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I understand you are the next Mail Order Bride to come to Wichita Falls.”

He felt Marlowe stiffen and then let out a childish giggle. His sister was secretly enjoying this farce and she was going to play the part well. The two were going to get along famously once the charade was

over and he was happily married to Addie.

“You must be Miss Addie. It’s quite a pleasure to meet you.”

Marlowe let go of his arm, took a step forward and took Addie’s hand. He watched Addie greet his sister with class and precision, no malice or discontent present.

“I’m certain you were hoping to make it to Mill Ridge to meet with Emma, with whom you corresponded with. However, it is too late for a lady of your means to travel alone. You are welcome to stay at my boarding house overnight.”

Max stepped up. He was not going to allow the two of them to get together. He loved his sister, but she’d tell Addie a tale so tall, he’d never get out of this in one piece. “I’m sorry, Addie, the arrangements have already been made. Thank you for your hospitality. We better go,” he told her, tipping his hat. “I’ll meet you at our regular time at Jenna’s Café.” With those words, he took hold of Marlowe’s arm and pulled her away.

He felt her eyes on the two of them as he pushed them at a fast pace up the street. “Keep moving, sis, and don’t say a word,” he warned her.

She began to giggle again. “I’m sorry, Max. You are terrible at this. I think she is on to you.”

“Addie is the smartest woman I know. She may have an idea of what I am doing, but there’s a little seed of doubt. I see the confusion in her eyes.”

“She is going to kill you.”

“Probably.”

A snort came out of his sister’s nose. “I am glad you invited me here. I can’t wait to watch this.”

“Here we are,” Max told her, pointing to the two-story structure right across from Addie’s boarding house. He turned back one time to find Addie standing in the middle of the boarded walk, watching as they went into the house he just bought.

He took his sister’s coat before showing her the new house. “This is all yours, Marlowe. I know you will love it here in Wichita Falls.”

Marlowe went through each room on the first floor, pleased. “I love

it already,” she told him, turning to give him a big hug. “Thank you, Max. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.”

“I haven’t been able to tell you, but I’m sorry about what happened to George and Amelia.” Max had felt bad for his sister. Awhile back, Marlowe’s husband and daughter were killed as they walked to church by an out of control horse and buggy. Marlowe had stayed home that morning, not feeling well.

Max took a guess she regretted not going to church that day. The life had gone out of his sister. Since then, she had volunteered to keep busy, but he knew she needed a new lease on life. This charade he volunteered her for was just what she needed. Especially after he had found out she was selling her home and coming out here to see him and start over anyway.

He had wanted to surprise Addie with the news that he had a sister and she was going to move to Wichita Falls. In all these years he never spoke about his family. That subject had always been off limits.

From the time he was released from being incarcerated, he’d never told Addie about his sibling. The time they spent together each Saturday night didn’t include anyone else but the two of them.

“I told you I wanted to be close to the only family that I have left,” Marlowe told him with a sad smile. She gave him a big hug. “I’ll help you with Addie, but I have a feeling you won’t need my help. You actually may have upset the only woman who obviously ever loved you.”

Max had to agree. “I am afraid I have the whole town of Wichita Falls on my side, so I have to go through with this now. She’s a stubborn woman, but I plan to make sure she sees the light.”

Marlowe grinned. “The light being you?”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

There was a sturdy knock on the door. “That must be the driver bringing your trunks. You certainly weren’t lying when you said you’d need help getting your things here.”

Marlowe chuckled. “I just sold my house that I lived in for the last twenty years.” She looked around. “I already know where everything will go.”

Max was glad to help. Marlowe deserved this change. He hadn't known he had a sister until a few years after he went to prison. She was a staunch volunteer and had been looking for her natural brother, who was amongst the prisoners. All she had was his name. Once they met, he knew without a doubt she was related.

His father had never been faithful to his mother and when Marlowe came along with her story, he knew it was true. She had his father's dark hair and nose. He had his mother's looks. They were the exact opposite in looks but the same in attitude.

The trunks that were brought in filled the living room space. Marlowe instructed the men helping to carry two of them upstairs. He shook his head, knowing she had it all under control. It was time to meet Addie at the café.

"I'll be back later to say goodnight. After all, you are supposed to be my mail order bride."

Marlowe shook her head. "I can't imagine what must be going through Addie's head right now. If she stops by, I will not refuse to see her. I think I'm going to like her very much."

Max ran a hand through his hair and walked out onto the porch. He watched as the blue color of Addie's dress disappeared through the café doors. She was there already, ready to question him, he was certain.

He almost was dreading this meeting tonight. Max figured he dug himself into a fine hole right about now. As he walked down the street, a few well wishers slapped him on the shoulder or gave him a wink of conspiracy. Everyone in town was in on what he was doing. They were all prepared to stand by and do whatever it took for him to get Addie to marry him.

Him.

An ex-convict who knowingly stood by and watched while his comrades robbed a bank and took the life of one man. He hadn't stopped them or even tried. Yet, he had paid for his mistake and tried to make it right. He did. The years spent in prison had softened him and all he had ever wanted was to live in peace and harmony right here in Wichita Falls.

With Addie.

He owed this town his loyalty and respect and they would always have it, no matter what.

He knew she wanted the same thing he did, to grow old with each other. He just had to help her along.

Max was at Jenna's Café, standing at the oversized glass window, staring at Addie sitting at a table near the back of the room. From all appearances, she looked refined, composed. Max knew better. He was going to make this evening a night she'd never forget.

He strolled in, walking slowly towards her with the look of a man who wanted no one else but her. She stared directly into his eyes and pressed her mouth together in the slightest move.

He greeted Jenna, who was gathering her two little ones as they made haste to get back to the Harper home outside of town. He sat down, nodding towards the group leaving. "It looks like Matt is starting quite a family now."

Addie smiled. She lifted her elbows from the table to place her arms in her lap. "Matt and Jenna are going to be taking a trip to visit his father. They'll be gone for quite some time. It looks like people are starting to move on from here."

Max gave her a careful look. "They'll be back. She owns half of the café with her brother, Harley. Matt has a promising business here. They have a home. They are just going for a little while."

He heard her sigh. "Times are changing," she said more to herself than him. She was not herself this evening. That meant one thing. He was getting to her.

When Leila arrived at their table, she brought them both a customary glass of wine, something they enjoyed each Saturday. Neither one normally imbibed, except for this one glass. Max wasn't even sure when it started, but all he knew was he never wanted their tradition to end.

Was he willing to settle for a Saturday each week or lose her forever? No, he wasn't. He wanted to hold Addie in his arms, sleep beside her, wake up with her body against his own. He longed to share the most intimate feelings with her.

He just had to knock some sense into the stubborn woman!

They ordered and made small talk. It wasn't the same. When they were through eating, Max asked her to take a walk. She always said yes, except this time she gave him a look that gave him pause. "Will you take a walk with me, Addie?"

"Why are we doing this, Max?"

He looked at her eyes, which were filled with confusion. "I don't understand."

"Why am I here with you while there is a woman in your new house waiting for you? Do you realize how humiliating this has to be for her?"

"She doesn't know about us."

"What?" Addie blinked.

Why did he say that? Max was trying to think quickly, but it never worked. He always gave a lot of thought to his words. Except for now, with Addie, he was being a darn fool. "I'm sorry, Addie. Marlowe doesn't know you and I are well, what exactly are we?" He thought this was as good of a time as any to discuss their relationship.

Except a few of the townsfolk were being obvious in walking past their table very slowly.

Max stood. "Let's go talk somewhere else."

Addie stood. "Very well. It may be time to make some changes."

Her words did not go over well. Max was starting to worry now. What was it about the tone in her voice that worried him? Was everything about to backfire? Dread filled him from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

The two walked down the street, like any other Saturday evening except he knew Addie was fuming inside. She usually took his arm as they strolled along, but not now. There was a physical distance between them and he didn't like this one bit.

Walking in silence, they rounded the corner that led to the waterfalls outside of Wichita Falls where their life all started so many years ago. The closer they got to the sound of the water rushing over the falls, the more nervous Max became. Was she feeling the same way?

Was this where it all starts and now ends?

They stood in front of the falls, watching the water cascade over the rocks. "It is so peaceful here, isn't it?" Addie clasped her hands in front of her.

Max wasn't watching the falls, he had eyes only for her. "This is our place, Addie. It's where I come to when I need a few moments of quiet. When I stand here all I remember is our dance here so many years ago. Do you remember?"

She turned to him. "Of course I remember. How can I ever forget? You were a dashing, convincing young man back then."

He smiled. "And now? What am I to you, Addie?"

She dropped her eyes, seeming shy. "You are Max. The man I cherish and have loved since forever."

He placed a hand on her sleeve. "I've asked you for years to marry me and you've refused for years. I'm getting old, and weary. I don't understand why you won't say yes. I've begged you forever and you insist the town needs you. Well, Addie, I need you more."

There, he said everything in his heart. There was no more to say. If bringing Marlowe here didn't make her jealous enough to shake some sense into her, he didn't know what else to do or say.

"I'm starting to realize the town is changing. I've given Wichita Falls my life, Max. Perhaps it is time to pass the torch onto someone else. Someone like Marlowe, your sister."

He opened his mouth to speak, then it snapped shut. From the time he met Marlowe until their dinner at the café was barely two hours. "How in the world did you find out?"

She shook her head back and forth. "Did you really think you can call a meeting while I'm in Mill Ridge without the town drunk letting it slip past me? Nate Jones was singing to the wind when he saw me right before I walked into Jenna's Café."

"I swear if that man doesn't stop drinking, I'm going to get Sheriff Montana to throw him in jail for this!" Anger welled up inside. He wanted to come clean about his sister, but not like this. Not by someone else telling her. Because he knew Addie too well. She was holding back her anger at being duped.

“When were you planning to tell me you had a sister?”

Then their eyes met and he saw something else there.

Determination. She had her mind made up about something. He just didn't know what it was yet. “I'm sorry,” he admitted. “I had planned to surprise you with my sister's impending visit. She lost her family awhile back and sold her house to come here to be with the only other family member she has left. When I am with you each Saturday evening, my sister is the last thing on my mind.”

“I understand. I'll visit with her tomorrow and we can end this farce. There is no need to be upset about it any longer. You are right, Max. I have dedicated my life to this town. Now it is time I take a step down and take the next step.”

Hope surged inside of him. His heart pounded and he pulled her closer. He dropped a sweet kiss on her lips. “I guess this worked then. All of the townsfolk were willing to help me change your mind. Every single person in town wants to see you happy, Addie.”

She gazed up at him and gave him an incredible smile. “They soon will. I'm selling most of my property and taking a year long steamship trip around the continent.”

Chapter 5

Addie had a hard time containing herself. She had to keep her composure. Max was horrified at her announcement. When town drunk Nate Jones bumped into her as she was making her way to the café earlier, she had been quite surprised to find out the woman on his arm was Max's sister. He had never mentioned any of his family before. Putting Marlowe in his new house made sense now, whereas before it didn't.

Of course, they never discussed anything except for each other on their Saturday time together. He always worked at the Montgomery Ranch all week long, so when they spent time together, there was no talk about family. It was a given they nurtured each other and left the outside world where it belonged. Now, everything had suddenly changed.

While she had waited for him at Jenna's Café, Addie came up with a plan to confront Max. She was almost certain he had the whole town going along with his plan to corner her into marrying him. At least that was the impression she got from Nate Jones before he closed up like a clam and claimed he was obligated to keep silent about everything. Including the surprise wedding Max had planned at the waterfalls at the month's end.

She wouldn't be a woman with a reputation for no nonsense in this town if she gave Max his way, now, would she? At least not right away. Besides, this was getting more and more interesting as the days wore on. What else did this man have up his sleeve? Even though he

had been steadfast all these years, Addie was having a bit of fun at his expense. Did he think he could dupe her like this? A smile played on her lips.

Now they stood facing each other and he was totally shocked that she found out. She wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and tell him it was okay, but she didn't. Instead, she sighed. "Oh, Max. Do you really think you can get away with doing things behind my back? I am the matriarch of this town, after all." She didn't mean to sound so prideful, but it was well known that she helped to build this town and she was playing on that fact now.

Max finally spoke. His eyes, which were now hooded, stared into her own. She ached to place the palm of her hand over his cheek, which always seemed to calm him. Instead, she waited.

"You plan to sell all your property and go sailing around the world?" He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I have to admit, Addie, this takes me completely by surprise."

She nodded, the brim of her hat brushing his skin. "Not all my property, Max. I will sell what I own in Mill Ridge and a few homes here in Wichita Falls to finance the trip. Your words had a distinct effect on me. I forgive you for trying to pull the wool over my eyes. But, you are right. It's time I thought of myself for once."

"I'm glad. Although I thought I made it clear that I wanted to marry you and make a life together here, in Wichita Falls. When I told you to do something for yourself for once, I didn't mean for you to sail off on a long trip. I meant for you to do something for us." His simple words caused her to stare hard into his eyes. Eyes that were torn. She almost caved in. After all these years together, they knew each other quite well. It was a wonder he didn't see right through her.

"I think it's time to get back, don't you? What would the townsfolk think of us staying out here alone so late?"

He cupped her face in his hands, a sad smile playing on his mouth. "I love you, Addie. I always have and if you think I won't continue to fight for you, you are sadly mistaken. I made a promise to you many years ago that I wasn't going anywhere. Do you remember the words?"

She nodded. "I remember every single word. You told me that you would always be here for me no matter what. Even though I refused to marry you at that time, you continued to look out for me, just like you did the very first day we met." She lifted her hand to brush it against his face.

"I meant it back then and I mean it now. I mean to have you as my wife, Addeline Brown. One way or another. You won't say no this time. I won't let you," he told her, while he dipped his head and kissed her, pulling her close against him. Addie fell into his embrace, melting away. There was no one close by to see them, so her arms went around his neck and she enjoyed the kiss immensely. As the matriarch of the town, she was so used to being cautious that it felt quite good to let loose for once.

Max let go first, placing his forehead to hers. His voice was thick with emotion. "Will you marry me, Addie? For the last time, will you?"

She pulled back, looking up to watch his emotions when she answered his question that she'd refused for many years. "Yes," she told him softly and smiled.

"I ask every Saturday, and I don't want to ask another one. Did you just say yes?"

She nodded.

"Whoo hoo!" He reached up, pulled his hat off and flung it in the air. "She said Yes!" His head was tilted back and he was shouting to the darkening sky. "Did you hear her? Addeline Brown said she'd marry me!"

"She said yes," a voice said behind them. A rustling of leaves caused them to turn towards the bushes near the road.

"What was that?" she whispered, bending down to see a pair of legs scrambling away. "Was someone there watching us?"

Max grinned. "I think the whole town has been keeping an eye out to see what happens next. We better get back to town, or else we'll have the whole crowd right here by our special place."

She placed her hand on his arm. "It is our special place, isn't it?"

Max leaned in for another quick kiss. "Always, my love."

They walked for a few feet before he came to a stop. "Are you still going to sell your properties and sail away from me, Addie?" His voice was light and teasing.

She glanced at him before replying. "Of course. But, it will only be with my husband by my side."

It didn't take long for the whole town to find out Addie said yes. Max was feeling over-protective as they strolled down Main Street. Townsfolk were on their porches cheering the couple on. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"I'm quite embarrassed to say the least," Addie admitted.

"You should be, darling. All of these people have waited and waited for years at a time for you to marry me. This is not an independent ruling here. The whole town wants to see you happy. This is the result of everything that has culminated up until today. You've worked hard to help make Wichita Falls a great town."

She smiled up at him, stopped and laid her hand on his cheek. "Well then, Max, let's put on a show they will certainly remember." With those words, she stood on her tip-toes and placed a kiss on his mouth.

Max was quite pleased that she finally showed emotion in front of everyone. He guessed times were changing for all of them. That didn't mean he was going to let her get away so easily this time. His arms went around her, pulling her close while he kissed her back like there was no tomorrow. He heard the townsfolk start to clap and then a few lewd remarks had him pulling back. "Now, now. There will be no disrespecting my wife-to-be. You keep those opinions to yourself."

There were two men who stood outside the saloon that made some wise cracks that a lady wasn't privy to hear. "Sorry, Max. We were so excited she finally said yes, it just came out."

"You are forgiven," Addie called out in her no nonsense voice. "I do believe we are in need of a celebration."

"What kind of celebration?" he asked, concerned now that Addie was eyeing the saloon. She stopped right in front of the wing-bat doors and lifted her chin.

“I do believe I’d like to go inside and have a toast.”

Max stared at her. “In all the years I’ve known you, I have never once seen you set foot inside this saloon.”

She lifted her chin. “I do believe it will be appropriate if I accept an invitation from you.”

Max shifted uncomfortably. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, Max. I think it is time I do a few daring things in my life. You’ve taught me I need to relax.”

Max wasn’t smiling. “I’m not sure the saloon is the place to unwind.”

She frowned. “Why not? You’ve told me to be more daring, to live life and now when I want to, you hesitate? I’m feeling quite daring, sir.”

With those words, Addie, picked up her skirts, swept across the boarded walk like the matriarch she was and pushed her way into the saloon through the doors. Max was right behind her.

He sighed. Maybe she wanted to experience something new, but Max knew he’d be looking from all sides to keep her from roving hands and disrespectful drunkards. He slid his hand down by his side, towards his hip, fingering the gun in the leather holster. Mostly, he kept it hidden underneath his jacket.

Max didn’t want to ever have to use it again. Those days were over. He hoped like the dickens this wasn’t a mistake allowing Addie to come in here. Then he laughed out loud. He couldn’t stop her if he wanted to. Addie and determination were the same word.

As she breezed through the saloon, the men inside called out to her and waved. They were pleasant and showed her nothing but courtesy.

Even so, Max didn’t let down his guard. He stayed right beside her, watching over her shoulder.

“What’ll you have, Max?” The barkeep asked Max first, figuring he was going to order for them both.

Addie raised a brow.

“I’ll have a mug of beer.”

He looked at his bride-to-be and shrugged.

Addie grinned and he knew she was going to speak up. It was why

he didn't order for her. She'd do her own ordering. He watched the barkeep in amusement.

"And I'll have a beer and a shot."

Max blinked. "You sure about that?"

"As sure as I'll ever be."

He wasn't going to argue with her. It made him wonder if she ever tasted whiskey before. The stuff in here was rot-gut, it made an experienced drinker wince.

The barkeep set the shot and beer in front of her and moved on to a new customer.

Max picked up his glass of beer and held it up. "To us, to a long life together. Finally."

"Here, here," she agreed, then picked up the shot, flung her head back while placing the glass to her lips.

Max's eyes widened when her cheeks became bright red and she forced herself not to choke.

"Excuse me," she muttered, then pulled a cloth handkerchief from her sleeve and spit into it. After wiping her mouth with the tip, she stuffed it into her pocket.

"You may want to take a drink of the beer to wash that awful taste down," he suggested. While Addie did, he gave the room a sweep with his eyes, turning his back to the bar.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten Addie by now and were back to their own business. A shot of relief went through Max until he noticed a group of men sitting in the back corner, hiding in the shadows.

The back hairs of his neck stood on end, although he didn't know why. They were minding their own business, sitting back there, but he didn't get a good feeling. Max turned back to Addie. "I think we should get going."

"I agree. This was so daring, but I do not belong here. Let's go, shall we?" she told him as if it were her idea. She took his arm as they made their way outside.

"It's about to get loud in there and who knows what riff-raff will show up," Max told her.

"Nonsense, Max. All the gentlemen inside are upstanding citizens

just getting out on a Saturday night. Why, I know the lot of them.”

“Well, maybe I want you all to myself,” he told her, trying to draw her away from the saloon. If it were up to Max, he’d never let her set foot inside there again. But, he knew too well it wasn’t up to him. Not with Addie. She was her own force to be reckoned with.

They walked arm in arm back to Addie’s boarding house where he waited on the porch while she fixed them a glass of lemonade. It was always how they ended their customary Saturday evening. Except tonight was special. She had finally said yes and it hit Max all of a sudden like a rip-roaring camp-fire that burned out of control.

“Your heart is beating twice as fast as normal,” Addie said. They were sitting on the wooden swing, his arm around the back while she rested her head on his shoulder.

He laid his head back and closed his eyes. “It’s beating for you, darling. All of a sudden the idea that next month this time, I won’t be spending Saturday night in Lily and Ben’s hotel like I usually do when I come see you. I’ll be right here with you.”

She shook her head. “No, sir. You will be in a stateroom on a ship heading somewhere exciting. Where shall we go?”

“You were serious about that?”

She blushed. “I have to be honest. I made that up to get you riled. It worked. After I found out you pretended to order a mail order bride to make me jealous, I thought that two can play at that game. In truth, it was quite exciting.”

He pulled her closer and placed a kiss on her forehead. “You are something, darling. Although, I’m relieved you don’t truly want to go on a steamer.”

“I’m not even sure steamboats take tourists aboard, Max. Do you know what I’d like to do? Maybe hire a private Pullman car and travel by rail to San Francisco. I’d like to visit there just once.”

“Then if that’s what you want, then we’ll do it. I’ll make arrangements for us. You worry about the wedding since it is only two weeks until the end of the month.”

“I wish you didn’t have to leave tonight,” she told him, curling closer.

Max took in her fragrance, vanilla and lavender. “Soon, Addie. It won’t be long.”

Chapter 6

The door swung open before Addie got up on the porch. “Addie, welcome! I hope you don’t mind if I call you Addie, after all, we will be sisters.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Marlowe, and I hope you don’t mind if I call you by your given name.”

“Come in, come in. Of course, I don’t mind. I have to tell you that I was anxious to hear from you today. I heard all about your tender meeting at the waterfall and how half the town knew you said yes to my brother. This is quite the interesting town, isn’t it?”

Marlowe shuffled her inside to the parlor, where a silver tray was waiting on the small end table. They sat down beside each other and readied the tea. Addie was right at home in her future sister-in-law’s new house. The fact that Max bought this dwelling for Marlowe after all she’d been through justified her thoughts of what an amazing man he was.

She had known it all along. It just took awhile for her to be able to let go of her duties here in Wichita Falls. Addie accepted the cup of tea and sipped. She held it in one hand and gave Marlowe a smile. “Wichita Falls is filled with a variety of people that will tug at your heart or drive you insane. You have to pick and choose.”

Marlowe laughed. “Well, I’ve already met a few nice gentlemen. I was at the mercantile first thing this morning and had offers to help carry my merchandise home. I solved the problem and had it delivered to my doorstep by a wonderful young man name Cleveland.”

“Cleveland is from the new family that arrived about a week ago. They live at the edge of town. A very nice family with seven children. Four boys and three girls. I’m sure if you have any work that needs done, Cleveland would be willing to help. His family can use the extra money.”

“Nothing gets by you, does it, dear?”

Addie had a gleam in her eye. “Very little does,” she told her new friend. “Although some try hard to pull the wool over my eyes.”

“You must be talking about my sweet brother. I warned him you were not going to take things lying down. You saw right through him, didn’t you?”

Addie nodded. “Of course I did. Everyone was trying to dupe me. They are all arranging a wedding for us at the end of the month. Well, I’m going to let them finish with their plans. After all, we are one big family here.”

“I’ve got some volunteer experience under my belt, Addie. If there is anything I can do, I’d be delighted to help.”

Addie patted her arm. “I’m sure the ladies of this town will be glad for your help and experience. I’ll introduce you later today if you have time. There is a church social later this afternoon. Folks come from a few hours away to attend our church pot luck supper on the second Wednesday of the month. Mill Ridge is an hour away and there are some folks from neighboring farms. Since many of the folks in the neighboring towns once started here in Wichita Falls, we like when they come visit again. You just so happened to arrive in time for all the festivities.”

“I’m glad. It’s time I stopped hiding in my house and started to live again. I believe I am ready. As you can see, no more widow’s weeds. Although, out of respect I will wear a weeping veil for a few more months.”

Addie was careful with her next words. “I’m sorry about your husband and child. Max told me what happened.”

“It’s been awhile since the tragedy. My life will never be the same again, but I now believe I was not with them that day because our good Lord has another purpose for me.”

“Do you have an idea what?” Addie asked.

Marlowe nodded. “It was the oddest thing. While I was on the train, I sat by a man and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Martin. They were tiny folks with the most pleasant conversation. They got off the train in Dallas and before Mr. Martin left, he turned to me and told me to prepare myself, the orphan train will be coming this way soon.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Martin are quite notorious. I would heartily listen to any advice they may give you.”

“It was quite mysterious and I still don’t know what he means yet, but time will tell. That’s my motto. I’m not rushing into anything. I’ve been spared for a reason and intend to find out.”

Addie stood. “Good for you. Marlowe, I’m happy you are here. May I come pick you up about four this afternoon to walk together to the church?”

“I would like that, Addie.” Marlowe gave her a hug. “I know you will make my brother very happy. Thank you for finally saying yes.”

Addie gave her a hug back. “I was planning to all along, but I commend him for his efforts. I must say I’ve been a stubborn, hard headed woman for many years.”

“You have.” She placed a gloved hand along Addie’s cheek. “You deserve to follow your dreams now.”

“I have followed my dreams. I want a happy life with Max, but I’ll be honest with you. If I don’t have my work, I’m not sure what I will do?”

Marlowe chuckled. “Max will give you a full life, don’t you worry, honey. Your place in this town isn’t going anywhere. You’re just relaxing a little.”

“Well, that’s good, because besides a trip to San Francisco, I plan to keep on building Wichita Falls.” She hesitated. “Or, grooming a younger person to follow in my footsteps.”

Marlowe walked her to the door. Oh, Addie. No one can fill your shoes.”

Addie gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You’re too kind, Marlowe. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Will Max be in town for the pot luck?”

Addie turned. "He will come in with the rest of the men from the ranch if he's not too busy. Even though he retired, he decided to help out until the end of the month when we marry. I'll be honest, I think he'll continue to go back and forth to keep busy."

"I'm sure he will be busy with you, my dear. At least for a while."

Addie was laughing when she left Marlowe's house. She stopped abruptly when three horses passed by her, cutting in a bit too close. "Ma'am," one of the men nodded and tipped his hat.

Addie perused the men, not recognizing their faces. "Good morning, gentlemen." She waited until they went by and crossed the street, turning to stare as they pulled up in front of the saloon. There was something she didn't like in the way they behaved. No one else would notice, but she did. Addie knew when there was trouble and her instincts told her they were not here for a friendly visit.

She made her way to the sheriff's office, quickly crossing back over. She didn't have to worry, Sheriff Montana was already out on his porch, leaning against the porch's rail. "I saw them, Miss Addie. They are not here to shake anyone's hand."

"I suppose we should find out what they want."

"Working on it now. As a citizen, I ask that you remove yourself from the worries and duties of a law officer."

"Oh, cut the nonsense, Montana. If it wasn't for me you wouldn't be wearing that badge. If you recall, I had the final vote to bring you on as sheriff."

"You remind me all the time, Miss Addie. Now, go on home and let me do my job."

She turned, picked up her skirts and ran back across the street. She knew he would take care of things now. The sheriff had a shady past before he came here, but they put those things aside and he was a force to reckon with. His wife, Rebecca, had been running from a crazed man when the sheriff saved her. But that was another event that happened in Wichita Falls.

Addie smiled as she went into her boarding house. There were so many memories, good and bad. Even though every one of her mail order brides were settled and happy, she missed the excitement it

brought to her life. It had been exhausting and exhilarating at the same time.

Perhaps spending some much needed time in San Francisco will rejuvenate their lives enough to come back and build the town even better. Except this time she'll do it with the man she loves by her side. There were times when she regretted her decision so long ago. Yet, looking back was not an option. Addie always forged ahead the best way possible.

She spent most of the afternoon cooking. As she stirred a pot of stew she planned to take to the pot luck, her thoughts wandered. When they married, would she still want to have guests here? Was it time to close the boarding house? God knew she no longer needed a way to earn a living. It would be nice to have the house for her and Max alone, but would she be satisfied with just them?

Addie knew her heart. It had always been a giving one. This was all so new for her, she had doubts clouding her vision at times.

Not having to get up and cross the street to get eggs from the Doc's back yard every morning would seem strange. Or, having to make sure to feed a hungry crowd. There had been times when all of her rooms had been filled to capacity. Combining the mail order business and boarding house had kept her busy for years. She had trained many mail-order brides to work in the boarding house, wanting them to have the skills to make it on their own if their situation didn't work out.

Not having to teach them any longer would also feel strange. Would she feel empty inside or would Max replace her nurturing spirit? A smile played on her lips. She was certain he'd keep her busy with just his fine kisses alone.

A noise at the back door startled Addie out of her state of mind. She checked to see if anyone was there, but upon investigating, didn't see anyone. A stray cat may have been on the back porch, tripping over a bucket. That's what it sounded like anyway.

When she opened the door, Addie saw an overturned bucket in the middle of the wooden porch, as if someone had tripped and fell over the thing. She picked it up and set it on the wooden bench there,

closing the back door tightly as she went back inside.

Two of the men that were renting came down to the parlor. When they smelled the soup that was simmering on the stove, they offered to carry it to the church later. She agreed whole heartily and made her way to her room to freshen up. It was going to be a pleasant evening.

Addie rested until it was time to pick up Marlowe. She crossed the street and collected her future sister. They walked towards the church arm in arm. As they passed the saloon, Addie noticed the three horses were still there.

Sheriff Montana happened to leave the saloon as they passed. "I reckon you've taken care of things here, Sheriff?"

He tipped his hat. "Ma'am," he answered and moved towards his office. "I'll see you at the church social." Which meant he was not going to talk about what happened until she cornered him privately. Which she would. Addie wanted to know what business those three men had in Wichita Falls. Or, who they were looking for, which may cause a lot of trouble this town did not need.

For now, she knew the sheriff had given them fair warning that nonsense would not be tolerated in his town. A smile played on her lips. Others had tried to cause trouble here and failed. She was certain those three men would too.

Marlowe nudged her. "Who is this handsome fellow?"

Addie raised a brow. "Do you mean the fellow walking alongside of Tom? That's his brother, who has had quite a distinct past. He lives in Cooper's Ridge, the town owned by Cooper and his bride, Catherine, the former Widow Young."

"That's quite a mouthful, isn't it?"

Addie laughed. "It certainly is. Let me introduce you."

"That would be wonderful."

After introductions, Addie and Marlowe walked along with the Cooper Ridge group until the church came into view. They all sat together at a table, while Addie looked around for Max. None of the men from the Montgomery Ranch were there yet, not even Ruby or her husband. They usually came early and left early since they had a distance to travel.

Instead of wondering, Addie got busy helping to arrange the food tables as each family brought a dish to donate. Hannah and her husband rode in from the Ward ranch with a parcel full of cookies to distribute. Hannah loved to make baked goods and send them to some of the families with lots of children.

“Hannah? Bring the cookies over here to this table,” Addie called out. She gave the girl a hug and noticed the bump in her belly. “Another little one on the way?”

Hannah nodded. “I think my husband is trying to fill the house we live in.”

Addie gave her another hug. “He’s got the money to do it, too.” The Ward ranch was the richest ranch in the area, although the Montgomery Ranch was giving it a run for its money. Addie was sure there would be banter between the two owners this evening.

She walked around the church yard, greeting others as they arrived. This was always so much fun and it broke up the long days and weeks until everyone got together. She had made a decision a long time ago that the people of this town and beyond would all continue to be in each others lives no matter what. So far the idea of a pot luck Wednesday was working.

When Elizabeth and Noah Holloway rode in, Addie walked over to them. “It’s such a pleasure to see the two of you and the little ones,” she told them, waiting for Noah to help his wife down from the buggy. The children all jumped out and ran off to meet the others playing in the yard.

Elizabeth gave her a hug. “Hello, Miss Addie, it’s nice to see you as well. Annabelle and Grant are on their way. They’ve decided to come this time.”

“Good, it will be nice to see them, too.” The Jennings had been missing for several months while Annabelle had another baby. Her husband, a former ranger, had a limp. He thought he was useless as a man until Annabelle came along with her love and showed him it didn’t matter. They were perfect for each other.

Addie stood behind the food table watching everyone enjoy themselves. The sheriff strolled over to where she was. He came to

stand beside her. “I watched them leave town. Not sure if they’ll be back. Hopefully, they don’t try to become brave and return.”

“Did they say what they wanted?”

“Nope.”

“Did you ask?”

“Nope. They weren’t the kind of men you ask politely. The only thing you can do with men like that is give them fair warning. It’s up to them if they take heed or not.”

Addie nodded, noticing Max and the men from the ranch. She gave the sheriff’s arm a squeeze. “You have kept this town safe since you put on that badge, sir. I know you will do it proudly.”

He tipped his hat. “Thank you, Addie. Go get your man, he’s coming across the yard.”

Addie hurried to meet Max halfway across the yard. “I’m so glad to see you,” she told him, rising on her toes to place a kiss on his cheek. He turned and caught her lips. His eyes crinkled as he laughed out loud.

“I’ve been waiting all day to see you.”

“Me as well. I’m not sure how I can bear to wait until the end of the month to marry you, Max.”

He sucked in a breath and took her hand. “Maybe we should just move it up to now. There’s Pastor Connors. Why don’t we ask him to hurry this along?”

“Oh, Max. We need to allow the residents to give us the wedding of our dreams. They’d be sorely disappointed if we went ahead of their plans.”

He growled. “It’s going to be a long two weeks!”

They filled their plates and sat down with the others for a good meal and conversation. When the food was almost gone, a three-piece string band began to play as young couples began to dance. Addie rocked back and forth, tapping her kid boots while enjoying the music.

A slow song began to play. Max stood and bowed, his hand out for hers. “Will you dance with me, my love?”

She placed her gloved hand in his as he led her closer to the music.

She placed her other hand on his shoulder. There wasn't any other place she'd rather be than in his arms. Tonight was perfect.

His warm breath at her ear made her heart flutter. "We were so young when we fell in love. I'll never give you up, darling. Not now, not ever."

She blushed, then looked quickly around to make sure no one was watching. "We've fought against all odds, haven't we, Max?"

"You are a woman stronger than anyone I know. You're my girl. You've always been, Addie. You are my future, I don't deserve this. How can a man be this happy?"

Addie closed her eyes and swayed in his arms. There were no words. She pulled him a little closer even if it wasn't the proper protocol. She loved all of him, every imperfection that made him the perfect man for her. She was about ready to tell him so when an explosion boomed in the air.

Beyond Wichita Falls fire shot into the sky, filling the dark night with orange and bright yellow flames. The musicians stopped the music, the crowd came to a standstill as everyone watched in shock as the flames got bigger and higher in the sky.

Addie stood in Max's arms, frozen to the spot like everyone else. She met the sheriff's eyes and that's when she knew.

She knew as well as the sheriff did; those men did not take heed to his warning.

Chapter 7

Everyone was staring at the lit up sky until the sheriff made an announcement. The church social was so quiet not even the children cried out.

“It looks like we may have some trouble,” Sheriff Montana announced. “I’ll need every man available to follow me.”

Addie let go of Max as he gathered his men from the ranch. He rushed back to give her a quick kiss. “I’ll come back as soon as I can, Addie.”

She hugged him tight. “Be careful, Max. There were three men here earlier. I’m afraid they may be behind this fire.”

He nodded. “Get back to your house. Lock your doors. I want you safe.”

“Oh, Max. You know I can’t do that.”

“Addie, just tell me you will. Tell me that so I can rush to put out this fire or whatever may be there and not worry about you. Please.”

She gave him a nod. “Very well. I’ll do that. After I make sure everyone else is out of harm’s way.”

He sighed deeply but didn’t have time to argue. He knew this was her town. She would make sure everyone was taken care of. He didn’t expect anything less from the woman he loved.

Max rode out like a bat out of a dark cave that finally found its freedom, along with the rest of the men from Wichita Falls. They followed the bright light of the fire that raged outside of town.

He rode alongside of the sheriff. “Addie said there were some men

in town earlier.”

Montana gave him a hard nod. “Yep. There sure were and I have a feeling they are behind this. Let’s ride out and find out if it’s a diversion from something else.”

“What do you mean a diversion? What do they want?”

“I have no clue. Doc James, Dawson Sloan and Daniel Ashwood are in town in case of any shenanigans. If this is a diversion, one of them will ride out to let us know.”

“It sounds like you have all the bases covered. Look, the old Winters farm is on fire.”

The men arrived in time to watch the roof cave in. The place had been abandoned about four years prior. No one had wanted to buy the place since it was in such bad shape. The house, a one story cabin, had newspapers over the windows and half the room was caved in. The only good thing was the land.

“This was a diversion,” Max said. “Did you happen to see the fellows Addie mentioned?”

Montana nodded. “Three men. Not friendly. Unkempt. I offered to pay for a bath when I confronted them in the saloon but they refused. I told them if they wanted to stay in Wichita Falls they had to clean themselves up. They said they were leaving and they did.”

“Three men you say?”

“One wore an eye patch.”

Max spun around.

The sheriff watched with guarded eyes. “What is it?”

“You are right. This is a diversion. I have to get back to Addie. They are up to something!”

The sheriff whistled for the rest of the men as they rode hell bent for leather back to town.

When they arrived, the streets were empty. The church yard was barren, tables and food still there. He noticed most of the lights in the homes along Main Street were off. Max raced up the street towards Addie’s boarding house, the rest of the men right behind him.

When he got to her place, three horses took up space out front. They were tied to the porch rail. Max slid from his saddle, checking

his hip, double checking to make sure his gun was at the ready.

As he slowly made his way to the front of Addie's place, the door flung open and a woman was pushed out the door. His sister, a horrified look on her face, saw Max and ran towards him. She fell into his arms.

"Sis, what is going on in there?"

"They have Addie. Told me to warn you not to try anything stupid or she dies."

"What do they want?"

"You. They said they need you to help them."

"What's going on in my town, Max? What did you bring here?"

Max shook his head. "Those three are what's left of the Bentley gang. The oldest one, the one with the eye patch, was in prison last I heard. I figured he'd rot in that jail since he's the one that did the killing."

"It looks like they are at it again. It's time they are stopped once and for all. I don't condone this kind of behavior in my town."

"They don't much care, Sheriff. I'll tell you that." He got closer to Addie's house. "I'm coming in. Don't shoot."

The door cracked open. "Get in here, Max and don't try anything foolish."

He looked back at the crowd that had gathered. "Send everyone home. This may get messy, Sheriff."

He barely listened as the sheriff ordered the crowd to disperse. All Max cared about was making sure no harm came to Addie. When he crossed the threshold, the door slammed behind him.

Addie was sitting in her parlor, her hands tied together with thick rope. She sat poised and gave him a reassuring smile. "They don't want to harm me, Max. But they would like you to help them rob the bank in Dallas. You know, the big bank no one has ever robbed before. They said you have some experience with explosives that they will need to make the robbery a success. They also said they wanted to be the first gang to do so." She swallowed, and all he wanted to do was shield her from this mess.

"Let's get on with it then, I'll help you."

Addie gave him a sharp look. "You'll help them?"

He nodded. "I'll do anything to keep you safe." He turned to the man with the eye patch. "Let her go, Ram."

Ram Bentley raised a brow. His teeth, stained by tobacco and years of not taking care of them, showed yellow when he smiled. Whiskers lined his jaw. "I'll let her go when you finish the job."

"If I say no?"

"I'll kill you. No, I'll kill her and make you watch. Then I'll kill you."

"You will never get out of Wichita Falls."

"Gentlemen, if I may interrupt, please."

The man with the eye patch laughed out loud, his bellows grating on Max's nerves. He hated that man more and more with each moment he stood there, aching to pull his gun. But three men had their guns trained on him.

"You may speak, Miss Addie. Thank you for being so polite at such a time as this."

She nodded. Max knew she was nervous but she was so brave. He would rob the bank if that's what it took to set her free. Anger seeped in at him. He had the chance to watch Ram die while he was in prison. The man he fought with gave him the eye patch. Max should've walked away that day and left him there to bleed to death.

He wasn't that type of man.

Now he wondered if he hadn't made a huge mistake.

"If you are going to rob the bank, then we should be on our way. This town has no business in this. Are we ready?" Her brow rose and she stared at Ram with a smile.

"Dammit it, Addie. Don't encourage these outlaws!"

Addie glanced at him then turned away quickly. He realized she wanted them out of town so the sheriff and others could deal with them away from here. He didn't blame her but she wasn't giving up her life to do so. She had sacrificed enough for Wichita Falls.

"You don't have to keep her hostage. I'll do it."

"How do you think we are going to get out of town, Max? From the looks of that sheriff, he's itching to pull the trigger. I know it's a fact

everyone holds Miss Addie in high regard. I'm afraid we need her, too."

Addie struggled to stand. "Well, then let's be on our way."

Max nodded. He knew it wouldn't do any good to argue. At least he had his pistol.

That is until Rami's brother, Stan walked over, pulled his jacket back and yanked it from his gun belt. Max clenched his fist, trying hard not to punch the man in the face. He stared into Stan's cold eyes until the younger man turned away.

"Let's go, you first Max."

When Max walked out the front door, about thirty guns were pointed at him. "Hold up, fellows," he told the crowd. "Put your guns away, they have Addie."

Relief shot through him when they listened. The sheriff stood out in front. "Where are they taking Miss Addie?"

Before he had a chance to speak, Addie began a long tirade. "We are going to Dallas to rob a bank, Sheriff. So, in order for them to do so, they will need help from Max. Since he has experience in this type of work environment, they'd like to have him along. You see, instead of asking nicely, they think Max will only do it if they kidnap me." She turned to the man with the patch.

"Sir, which horse would you like me to ride on? There are three horses and five of us. It appears that someone did not plan this out well at all."

Max almost laughed. If he wasn't so worried about her life, he'd probably laugh out loud. He knew better. Ram was stupid as a rock but no one to trifle with. He'd hurt Addie if they weren't careful. The other two, they were blundering fools. Stan and Dan had been followers from the beginning. They'd do whatever Ram asked them to do.

It was good he knew how they operated. He'd have to go along with it until he was able to get Addie to safety. And he would. It wasn't even a question in his mind. He scanned the crowd. By the looks of them, there was no way this outlaw gang was going to hurt the matriarch of Wichita Falls.

“Someone bring us a horse please?” Addie shouted out. In a matter of seconds, the crowd parted and a gelding was brought to her.

“Get on up there,” Ram ordered. Max helped her onto the saddle and got up behind her. He could easily take off but it was time to stop these men at their own game.

“Tie the reins to the back of your horse, Sam,” Ram ordered. The younger brother did as he was told. Each man got on their horses, their guns drawn.

Ram turned back to the crowd. “No one and I mean no one better follow us. Do you know what will happen if you do?”

Nate Jones, looking shocked at what was going out, stumbled out into the street. “What will happen, one-eye?” He raised his fist in the air and almost tripped.

Ram snorted. “You can’t even see two feet in front of you!”

Addie spoke up. “Now, now! There is no reason to be mean.” She turned to look at Nate Jones. “Nate, they will kill me, so you better go back inside and stay safe.”

“What! The hell you say!” He turned to the crowd. “Are we going to let those idiots get away with this?”

The crowd grumbled and tried to shush Nate, to no avail. He turned back to yell out, “Don’t worry, Miss Addie. We got your back.”

Four horses clip-clopped slowly through the street towards the edge of town, three outlaws with rifles at the ready in case anyone tried to stop them. Townsfolk came out on their porches to watch them go by.

Max watched carefully, hoping no one would do anything stupid. He needed them all to stay still for Addie’s sake. Outside of town he’d have a better chance to disarm these outlaws. Here, in town, someone would get hurt.

He looked back once to see the sheriff standing there, legs apart, hands at his gun belt, staring furiously as he watched them go. Two men stood on either side of him, Noah Holloway and Grant Jennings, retired Texas Rangers. They looked formidable and not willing to let things rest as they were. The Bentley brothers had no idea the force behind Addie Brown.

They had no idea at all.

Chapter 8

Addie leaned into Max for strength. “If I die, at least I’ll have had this time with you. At least you’ll know how much I do care and that I had every intention of marrying you.”

“Shh, Addie, don’t talk now. We’ll talk later,” he told her in a low voice. His warm breath braided her hair as he tried to make sure no one was listening. “No one is dying. Not you. I’ll never let anything happen to you.”

She snuggled into him as they rode along the dark road. It was not a smart or safe way to travel at night, but she had a feeling these men were not all that smart. Just too bold for their own good.

Even so, the fear of a life without Max scared her. What if they did succeed in robbing the bank? Max would become an outlaw in the eyes of the law once again. He’d go off to jail for how long this time? Maybe even hang. Didn’t he see the error of agreeing to help them? Hopefully, the gang wouldn’t get close to Dallas.

They rode for almost an hour before turning the horses down a beaten path along the creek. They were so close to Mill Ridge, Addie looked back to see if Max realized it, too. He did, but then glanced away.

Where were they taking them?

Then it dawned on her. The only place out this way was the cabin along the creek that belonged to the old animal doctor who left Wichita Falls a few years ago. It was the cabin where Salem, the sheriff of Mill Ridge, had found his wife Sophie after she got lost. “I

think we are going to the cabin past the rapids.”

“I think you are right. I remember the other year how we searched for Salem’s wife when she got lost. There are some dangerous rapids close by. Don’t worry, darling. I’ll keep you safe.”

He was always telling her he’d keep her safe. And, here they were, riding through the dark night because of his past. Although, it wasn’t Max’s fault this came to pass, it was bound to happen sooner or later. “Do you see why I didn’t marry you years ago? Imagine if this happened fifteen years ago, Max? I don’t know if Wichita Falls would’ve been strong enough to get through something like this.”

Max growled. “Did it make a difference, Addie? They still came back for me, married to me or not. Maybe I should’ve gone away the first time you refused me. Now, all I’ve done is put you in the direct center of this mess. But, right now, all I care about is if you are still going to marry me after all this is over. Because I saw the looks in the townfolks eyes and there’s no way these men are going to get away with any of this. We have an army behind us, darling.”

Addie giggled, placing her tied hands over her mouth to stifle the sound. “I’m not worried, dear husband-to-be. And, yes, I’ll marry you. I’ve already made up my mind days ago.”

“Even before I brought Marlowe into the picture?”

She nodded. He nuzzled her neck. She sighed. They had a long run, the two of them. A few outlaws weren’t going to stand in the way. Not now. Not ever.

Addie and Max were familiar with the cabin. They were ordered to go inside while the three men stayed out after building a small fire. After Max was given permission to untie her hands, Addie made her way to the small table in the corner, shuffling in the dark until she found an oil lamp and match sticks there. She struck the head of the match on the wooden table to get a flame. The moment it lit up, she pulled the glass off the lamp and lit it, throwing light into the

darkened one-room shack.

“There isn’t much room in here, is there?”

Addie shook her head. “Enough for one or two people. I am not sure how all of us are going to fit.”

“I’m pretty certain the men will stay outside.”

“How do you know?”

“I rode with them, remember?”

Addie made a tsking noise. “Had you ever kidnapped someone before?”

“Of course not, Addie.” She watched him as he touched everything in the room. Even the rug in front of the small bed setting in the corner. He kicked the floor with his boot before moving the rug to find a trap door.

“What is it?” she asked, making her way there. She bent down to find the door was not latched. Lifting it up, there was a slight creaking noise. She stiffened when a voice rose up right outside the front door. Addie let go of the handle right as the front door began to open.

Max swung down and pulled her to him, taking his boot to push the rug over the hidden door. He gathered her in his arms and kissed her like she was never kissed before. Even though it was done for the sake of the man who peeked inside, she kissed him back with everything she had in her.

“I see what all the noise is. Max, you surprise me. You never wanted anything to do with women before. Now look at you. Can’t keep your hands off the lady.”

“Get out!” Max told him, his voice low and threatening.

“I don’t think you are in a position to talk to me that way,” Stan told him. “Besides, Ram wants to talk to you. He wants you in on the plans for tomorrow.”

“We’re doing this tomorrow already?” Max tensed in her arms. What did they plan to do with her, leave her here alone while they robbed the bank in Dallas? That was almost four hours away.

“Sure are, now get out here and talk to the boss.” He left the door open and motioned for Max.

Reluctantly, he let her go, kissing her nose and giving her a sad

smile. "It will all work out, darling."

"I know it will. Now, go."

He leaned in. "As soon as I go out, I want you to open the trap door and crawl under the cabin. It will lead you out to the fields. By now, the men of Wichita Falls will be close. Go North, do not head back to any sounds of water. I don't want you near the rapids. Go on, don't try to be a heroine. I love you, Addie."

"I can't leave you here by yourself."

"You claim to love me, Addie. Then, show me how much. How much are you willing to sacrifice right now for me? Go on, get out of here."

"Hurry up, Max! Boss ain't going to wait much longer."

Addie heard another voice growling. She moved quickly when Max closed the front door. Sliding the rug out of the way, she carried the oil lamp with her down the ladder to make sure she wasn't going to fall into a snake pit or some kind of animal lair. When the coast was clear, she blew out the lamp, crouching under the cabin.

Her eyes adjusted to the night and she found her way to the back of the cabin. Voices argued for a few minutes. She stayed real still until they began to talk in normal voices. Would they harm Max when they realized she was gone?

No, they needed him. She just hoped she'd make her way back to the others in time to stop this bank robbery.

Addie was not as young and agile as she used to be. Crawling around underneath a cabin was more difficult than ever, but she made her way out from under the house and stood behind the cabin, careful not to make any more noise. She wanted to shake off the dirt but didn't dare make any noise. She looked down to find her hands shaking.

Even though it was dark, there were thousands of tiny stars to light up the night. She made her way halfway across the yard before her heel caught a hole in the ground and she fell with a thump. Addie froze when she saw one of the men walk to the side of the cabin, his back facing her and pulled down his britches. That was a sight she'd rather not see, but she had to keep her eyes on his next move.

There was a tiny outhouse beside the cabin, but the idiot was still squatting there like an animal. Addie laid there quietly shaking her head. She hoped he'd hurry. She wanted to be on her way.

Finally, after five minutes of waiting, he stood and buckled himself up, then walked out of sight. She stood and ran as fast as possible, wanting to make it to the tree line before they noticed her gone. If she was able to hide behind the trees, they'd never know which way to look.

Hopefully, no one would notice her gone until morning. Then, it would be too late because she planned to bring the sheriff back here to arrest these men. For now, she had to find her way to Mill Ridge, which was only a few miles away.

But in which direction? Addie never panicked. Her heart beat faster than usual, but she had taught herself many years ago to breathe deeply and give it to God. She followed her own advice, clearly putting this whole mess in the hands of her maker.

A slight movement on her left caught her off guard. Then, she noticed the small army of men coming her way. It was hard to make out who was there, but she knew the men had arrived. They probably had someone following the outlaws from the start.

"Psst. Psst."

"Did you hear that?" Sheriff Nightingale's voice was distinct. She'd know him anywhere.

"Salem? It's Addie."

"Addie? What the -"

"I'm fine. I'm behind the tree, coming over to you." She hadn't wanted to surprise the men. Some were jumpy and may have tried to shoot before asking.

She lifted her skirts and made her way to his voice. He was speaking to the men, who were all along the tree line. There were probably thirty to forty bodies with him.

Sheriff Montana was there too, along with all the men from the Montgomery Ranch. Even Mr. Montgomery himself, Ruby's husband stood behind a tree wearing a gun belt.

"I see you've brought an army with you."

“How did you get away?”

“There is a trap door under the cabin.”

“Can you show me where?”

“You want me to go back there?”

“You may have to, Addie. We need to get Max out of there fast.

Before daylight hits. Those boys are some mean outlaws. They intend to have Max help rob the bank and shoot him before he leaves the bank. If we can get a few men into the cabin from the trap door, we can surprise them before anyone gets hurt.”

“How do you know they will shoot him? Maybe they won’t.”

One of the men she didn’t recognize at first spoke up. “I heard them talking in the saloon. They thought I was passed out at the next table, but I woke up. They plan to shoot and kill him as payment for not coming back to their gang when he got out of jail.”

Anger welled up inside of Addie. She knew there was a possibility that they would try to shoot Max, but to know they planned to kill him in cold blood had her rip-roaring mad. “What kind of animals are they?”

“They don’t care about human life, Addie. Will you help?”

“Yes, if you follow me, I’ll point you in the right direction.”

“Just get us in there and then come back here. The men will cover you if someone sees you.”

“Give me a damn gun and I’ll help you get those outlaws.”

“No.” Every man hiding in the woods gave a resonate no. They knew her too well. It was probably for the best since she had a mind to march up there and point a gun in that one-eyed man’s face. See how he liked threats!

“Men, quiet.” Salem’s voice boomed across the night air. It gave her a chill. Addie knew he was a force to be reckoned with and the serious tone he took right then made her feel better. These men would take care of business.

She didn’t even know why she was so worried.

As she led them out from the trees across the backyard of the cabin, she realized she did know why. If anything happened to Max, now when they were finally able to marry and spend the rest of their lives

together, she'd go to her grave blaming no one but herself.

A fierce determination came over Addie. After all these years of making him wait, she was going to make darn sure he got what he wanted, a wedding!

"Give me a gun, Sheriff."

"No. Stay quiet and stay back, except to point where the trap door is located."

The men were so quiet as they got closer no one in the front yard of the cabin ever suspected anyone was out back. Nightingale and Montana used hand signals to move the men.

He motioned for a small group to cover both sides of the cabin while Addie pointed at the direct spot she went under the cabin. She got down on her belly and crawled once again, trying to remember which way to the trap door. When she felt around, she caught the handle, and moved out of the way. Sheriff Montana pushed the trap door open and disappeared through it, along with a few other men. She watched the boots scuffling around the sides of the cabin.

The outlaws wouldn't know what hit them.

"If you want me to help you rob this bank, I better get some shut-eye."

Boots shuffled around, throwing dirt in the air. Addie knew she should listen and get moving back to the tree line, but when she heard Max's voice, she froze. She didn't want to leave him.

"Where do you think you are going?" Ram's voice sounded tired.

"Inside, to Addie. I'm not leaving her in there alone all night."

"Go on then. Don't try nothing. You can't get away. There's one door in and out, Max. If you try to escape, I shoot the woman first."

"That's right. You need me for the robbery. Don't worry yourself, Ram. I'll do the job. I told you that much. I don't want Addie hurt."

"Well, we'll make sure your little sweetheart is safe. Now, go on and get inside."

Addie waited for Max to go in the cabin. But, he stood there, not moving. She was getting nervous.

"Let me tell you something, Ram. We never liked each other, but if you harm one hair on my woman's head, I'll kill you."

Addie stuck her hand in her mouth so she didn't cry out. His words pulled at her heartstrings even though it was a threat to another human life. The way he said it she knew he meant every single word. A tear fell down her cheek. She closed her eyes. *Please, Lord, let everything work out. Keep Max safe no matter what.*

Addie knew she should leave. She even scooted towards the back of the cabin only to move closer when she heard the voices inside. Wasn't she better off right here than in the woods? Everyone had this place surrounded. She stayed right where she was. It would be over soon.

"What was that?" Ram called out.

"Who is coming?" Stan whispered, cocking the hammer of his pistol.

Boots shuffled in the dirt. Dan moved across the porch where he was stationed to guard the door to the cabin. "What the hell is that?"

Addie heard the sound of a wagon rolling along the lane parallel to the river. A horse snorting air drifted over the land as each man stood staring at the oncoming wagon.

Addie needed to get out from under the cabin and find out exactly what in the world was happening?

Who was coming hell-bent for leather in the middle of the night?

Chapter 9

Max raised his hand in the air. "I hear a wagon. Maybe more than one."

Both sheriffs agreed. They couldn't open the front door so they stood back against the wall listening. Who was coming down the lane? Was it friends of Ram? If so, they'd need more than these few men to get out of this one, Max surmised.

"Stop that wagon!" Ram's loud voice barked.

The wheels came to a halt. The moment he heard a foray of hammer's cocking, Max knew things were running in their favor. He flung open the door. "I think the Cavalry is here," he told the others, who cocked their guns and followed Max outside. One by one they came through the door of the tiny cabin only to stop short when they saw what was taking place.

Max stood there, one hand on the trigger, watching in amazement as the women of Wichita Falls held the three men at bay with their shotguns aimed right at the outlaws.

"Put the guns down, all of you," one of the women ordered. "Don't need no one trying to shoot. I'm about as accurate as that Annie Oakley that Charity's been writing about in her newspaper. As a matter of fact, I can probably shoot an acorn out of a squirrel's mouth."

Lily Sloan stood in front of the first wagon in her extravagant red dress, holding a shotgun like a seasoned veteran. From all appearances, she looked like a fragile beauty, but the cold look in her

eyes told a different story.

She motioned to Stan and Dan. "Go on, throw your pistols to the ground."

They didn't.

One of the other ladies on the bench seat stood up, aimed and shot Stan's hat off his head. It tumbled to the ground and landed in the fire. "I'm the second best shot in Wichita Falls. My name is Rebecca and my husband right behind you is about to make an arrest." While she stared down the outlaws, Rebecca blew a kiss to Sheriff Montana. "Hello, honey."

"Hi, darling. Guess telling you to stay home didn't work."

She smiled, although it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Not when someone tries to hurt our Miss Addie. She'd be the first one to come after us if the roles were reversed."

"Here! Here!" The women chanted.

Both Stan and Dan dropped their guns, raising both hands in the air. "Alright! I'm giving up. Don't shoot," one of them called out. "Tired of this life anyway. We get to rob the bank, do all the dirty work and then Ram gets most of the money, keeping us on a thin leash. At least in jail we'll have a square meal and a cot. It's hogwash!"

Another of the ladies jumped down from the wagon, pointing her six-shooters at Ram, who still held his gun. "Drop your gun, mister."

"I think we can take it from here, Sophie," Sheriff Nightingale told his wife. "Thank you, ladies. Keep the guns trained on the men. Ram, drop the gun."

The man was slowly backing up, trying to fade into the darkness. Max knew without a doubt he was going to make a run for it so he held his hand in the air to stop the others from shooting at him. He didn't know where Addie was out in the prairie. He kept his eyes on Ram and directed his question to Montana. "Sheriff, where did you leave Addie?"

"She showed us where the trap door was hidden. I told her to get back out to the tree line."

Dread filled him. Addie would listen to those instructions about as well as the ladies in front of him holding rifles, shotguns and pistols.

He called out into the night, knowing full well she'd hear him. "Addie, stay hidden, wherever you are. Please."

Ram growled. He kept backing up into the darkness. "You'll have to kill me because I ain't going back to prison."

"That's not a problem," one of the ladies called out, lifting her rifle to her shoulder. When Ram saw how the other ladies followed suit, he made a run for it, backing up into the dark night until his form disappeared.

"Ladies! Get back in the wagon! Now!" Both sheriffs threw out the order at the same time. "He's dangerous and may try to hurt one of you, now let us do our job!"

The ladies did listen to the order, but complaints were heard from the wagon. "We are dangerous too. He best keep running," Elizabeth Holloway shot back. "My husband will hunt him down if he gets away. He's a hard-nosed Texas Ranger, and he's here, waiting to make his move."

"So is mine," Annabelle Hart shouted, whose husband was a retired ranger as well. "Ladies, stay alert. The outlaw may try to sneak up on us."

"He won't succeed," Caroline, Doc Hart's wife said. All the ladies turned their backs to the center of the wagon and scanned the surrounding area.

Max didn't have to worry about the ladies. They seemed to know what they were doing. He had to find Addie and make sure Ram didn't find her before he did.

Because that was the only way Ram was going to get out of here alive.

Addie heard everything. She began to scoot towards the back of the cabin to get out from underneath. She wanted to get out there with the ladies and give them each a big hug. Crawling on her belly again, she scooted through the back entrance, standing straight up. Ram

stood there, although she wasn't able to see his face, she knew who it was from their conversation a moment ago that he had fled the scene. She ducked and squatted down, trying to roll away from him, but he pulled her up to a standing position.

Then, Max appeared out of nowhere. "Ram, let her go." Men began to line up behind him. The outlaw wasn't going anywhere.

"I'd say this is my ticket to freedom," he told Max, taking a hold of Addie and pulling her plum against him, the gun pointing at her face.

Addie wasn't sure if she was more angry or scared. When she squatted down, it gave her just enough time to pull out the small knife in her boot. She had learned years ago to always have a form of weapon on her person. Even if it wasn't enough to kill someone, at least it would startle an attacker so she'd be able to get away.

The outlaw tightened his grip around her. She tightened her grip on the dark handle of the knife. "Back off," he told the others. "Do it now, or she dies."

"She dies, you die next," Max said, his voice low and gravelly, his gun pointing right at them. "Addie, are you alright?" His voice softened when Max addressed her.

She looked at the man she was in love with. They had a long run together. She knew at any moment life could be over for either one of them. But, she wasn't the type to give up. She wasn't about to die at the hands of an outlaw. From the looks of it, neither was he.

Max was close enough, she was able to see the expression in his eyes. He dropped his eyes to her side and that's when she knew he wanted her to use the knife. He had seen it in her hand. She gave him a nod.

Addie raised her arm slightly, enough to make sure the tip of the blade would hit the intended target. The moment it did, Ram's arm loosened in surprise and she dropped to the ground, rolling away in a sea of skirts. She looked up in time to see Max aim at the outlaw.

"No need to do that," a voice came out of nowhere. Elizabeth's husband, retired Texas Ranger Noah Holloway took the butt of his pistol and cracked it across Ram's skull, knocking him to the ground, unconscious.

One of the other men took rope and hog-tied the outlaw, then about four men drug him to the front of the cabin where they'd haul him away to spend the remainder of his life in prison, or hang.

Addie didn't care which one as long as justice was served. Max's strong arms picked her up and wrapped her in his embrace.

"I'm glad it's over." He leaned in to kiss her gently, while chaos reined around them. "I love you, Addie."

"I love you, Max. Let's get married. Today. I don't want to wait another moment to become your wife."

"I think I need to ask you properly before we proceed. In front of everyone so you can't change your mind today." He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the wagon where the women were waiting. When they saw Addie safe, they helped her onto the wagon seat and gave her hugs and kisses.

Addie looked up, watching him watch her. He had the most serious face ever. The ladies all quieted down and stared at him, too.

Then he spoke. He got down on one knee, watching her reaction. "Miss Addeline Brown, will you become my wife? Today? I know everyone is planning the wedding for the end of the month, but I did hear you say you didn't want to wait a moment longer. Shall we go to the church right now?"

She giggled. Max had proposed to her a million times before, it seemed, but never like this. With all her friends who were like family watching. "Yes, I will. Let's get to it," she announced, flinging her head back and laughing.

The ladies roared with glee. They all began to talk at one. Max shook his head but the look she gave him was for his eyes only. It was filled with promises of a future together they had waited for all their lives.

"Come on, ladies. let's get to the church. We've got a change of plans and little time to get it done!" One of them called out. The wagon began to move, turning around and going back up the lane towards Wichita Falls.

Addie turned back several times to find Max standing, legs slightly apart, a pistol on his hip, watching, until she was out of his sight.

Max stood at the alter beside Pastor Connors wearing a three-piece suit one of the men loaned him for the occasion. This was unusual, the man of cloth said before his wife hushed him and told him to get on with the ceremony. The amount of bridesmaids were unimportant. She stood slightly behind him, a bouquet of flowers in her hand. Max was too nervous to smile at their banter.

Then the music began to play. From the back of the church, one by one, each mail order bride that Addie had brought to Wichita Falls began the long descent up the aisle. Each woman held one yellow rose in her hand. First was Ruby with tears streaming down her face, followed by Grace, Charity and Lily in bright red dresses. After them came Rebecca, Sophia, Hannah, Leila, Ellie and Jenna, all with wide smiles they were unable to hide.

Max grew more nervous. She had told him no for so long he didn't think he'd ever be standing here. Would she show up? Or, run at the last moment? It all seemed like a dream come true, but he needed desperately to see his Addie walk down the aisle.

Every lady from Mill Ridge who was one of her mail order matches or had a connection with Addie followed the ladies of Wichita Falls. Elizabeth, Rose, Caroline, Annabelle, Jennie and Marlene walked down the aisle; followed by the White brides, Abigail, Callie and Melody, with their mother-in-law Nora White trailing the group. Behind Nora was Catherine Young, a widow until Addie gave her some good advice. Her daughters-in-laws, Olivia and Naomi walked with her, ending the trail of ladies who held Addie in such high regard.

The music got a bit louder and then Addie began to walk up the aisle. Max's heart began to pump so hard he restrained himself from going to her as she walked towards him. A lump formed in his throat when he realized she wore the exact traveling dress she wore the day they met. He was surprised she kept it all these years.

She had been watching the floor at first but all of a sudden she looked up and their eyes met and his heart stopped for a moment.

Then, unable to help himself and going against the protocol, Max began to walk towards her, something unheard of in a traditional wedding.

He closed in on her, halfway down the aisle. As she stared at him, not surprised at his actions, a huge smile played on her lips as he picked her up in his arms, swung her around twice while everyone looked on.

She flung her head back, and laughed out loud. Everyone clapped, drowning out the music. "I was worried you wouldn't show," he whispered to her.

He felt her shiver.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world."

He carried her to the altar, his beautiful bride. It was worth the wait when he looked into her eyes as she repeated the vows he had longed to hear.

When it was his turn, he once again defied the odds and spoke his own words. "I saw you on these streets so many years ago. I knew you were the one for me right then as you stood in the middle of all the chaos. When you walked towards me that day looking for answers, I wanted to protect you from the harsh life here in Wichita Falls.

But you proved you are a force to be reckoned with. Over the years, you've turned this town into your own, bending and breaking it to build a town every citizen is proud of. You put yourself last over the years.

I swear to God above, for the rest of your life, you will be first and I plan to show you exactly how I'm going to do that."

The pastor cleared his throat. The audience was deathly silent as they listened to a man claim his bride. The old adage, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop applied here. Max didn't notice what went on around him. He just wanted to take his bride home. In a hoarse whisper, Max broke the silence. "I take you for my bride, today and forever, Addeline Brown."

"I'm supposed to say that," Pastor Connors spoke up, causing a ripple of laughter from the crowd.

"Then, get on with it, Pastor," Addie told him.

“I’ve waited a long time to say this. Max Anderson and Addeline Brown, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride. Put her down first, please!”

Max grinned.

Addie threw her bouquet in the air and pressed her mouth to her husbands.

The crowd clapped and roared.

Someone began to ring the church bells, but it didn’t phase any of the townsfolk in the church. They were all too busy cheering while Max kissed his new bride.

I hated to say goodbye to the folks in Wichita Falls. But this is where this story ends and perhaps a new story begins. I’ve enjoyed writing about every single bride, but Addie was the most difficult to finish, knowing the series was complete now. I ended it with Max because he deserved it after waiting for her for so long.

Keep reading for a free chapter about some ex-civil war veterans looking for a place to call home.

FREE Chapter

Peg Leg's Princess

Peg Leg stood overlooking the hot springs, its steam rising over the water in the crisp morning air. It was still dark enough that if anyone ventured outside or looked from the windows of the small cabins built around the water source, all they'd see is a shadow of a man going for an early morning swim

He sat down on the edge of the pond, loosening the leather straps first, then slowly shifting the wooden leg and removing it from the stump right below his knee.

Relief surged through his whole body as he laid the heavy wooden prosthesis aside. He slid into the pond, anxious to feel the warm healing waters upon his skin. Peg Leg sighed. He moved quietly through the water, his tense body relaxing. This was the best thing he'd ever done when Calvin asked him to take over the hot springs project. Especially not knowing how the minerals in the water would calm his aching limb.

His boss, Cal, bought this parcel of land adjacent to the Pistol Ridge Ranch a while back after discover the hot springs on the land. Cal and his wife snatched it up before anyone else could so they enlarged the ranch and for other personal reasons. Of course, there was a bit of controversy involving Cal's own father, causing the whole town of Pistol Ridge to come to the rescue. Peg Leg was learning this town was like family. Mess with one beloved person and boy, oh boy, the results are not pretty!

Cal's wife, Theresa, had a young sister stricken with consumption, who relied on the healing waters to keep her malady under control. When Cal decided he wanted to share the healing waters with those who couldn't afford high-cost resorts like Glenwood Springs in Colorado, he asked Peg Leg to manage the project and build cabins and a small structure to use as a hotel.

Peg Leg figured, why not? It wasn't like he was doing anything of importance anyway. With a small band of ex-soldiers who became friends and comrades over the years, they had completed the project last week. A few of the men moved on, but the majority were still here, undecided about what to do next.

Four of the men hired on to continue to help until another opportunity came their way. It had been that way since the civil war of the states. There were eight of them in all, and had all been drifters afterwards, each moving on to something else. Abel finally found his home here in Pistol Ridge. No one else really knew where they belonged. Which was fine by him, he still needed their help, so he hoped the others stuck around for awhile. There was only so much a man with one leg can do.

A slight movement out the corner of his left eye had Peg Leg swim slowly towards the edge of the pond where his wooden leg and gun were sitting.

“Don’t be alarmed. I’m surprised you didn’t hear me sooner.”

Peg Leg swore. “I should’ve known you were up and about this early, Raven.”

A quiet guffaw came from his old comrade’s gut. Raven was an expert at not making any noise, including breathing sounds. For that reason alone they always sent him in the midst of any trouble. He seemed to know how to manoeuvre around without getting caught. He was in and out of a situation before anyone knew he was there. Once they learned each other’s strengths in the war, it continued on whenever there was trouble or a situation arose. Every one of them could count on each other no matter where they were.

“I was here twenty minutes ago when you first came to the pond. You were lolly-gagging over something, staring out into the dark night like a love sick girl. What’s gotten into you, man?”

“Calling me names again? I ain’t no love-sick girl! You and the other cronies just can’t leave me be!” Peg Leg didn’t need a lecture on how he should start living and get over losing his leg. How does a man do that?

“Ah, come on, Peg Leg. You know I care about you, man. It’s no different than when we were serving in the war. We all made fun of each other. Hell’s bells, man, it was one of the ways we got through each day, with someone poking fun at the other. It was just another day in the life of a soldier.”

“We’re not in the war anymore, Raven. It’s been almost ten years.” He probably should word that differently because now Raven will mention how long it’s been since he lost a leg and how it’s time to settle down.

“Ten years and you’re still thinking you’re not good enough. Maybe it’s time to get you settled down and married to a pretty wife. This place seems to suit you, man. Seems like you found a spot to call home.”

Peg Leg shrugged. “There’s not a woman ten miles from here that would want a cripple. You know it as well as I do.”

Raven pushed through the water. He passed Peg Leg and climbed out, the water running off his biceps and down his thighs like a mountain waterfall. His body was fit and muscular with bulging arms and legs that Peg Leg envied. “Nah, you ain’t right in the head, Peg Leg. No one thinks of you as a cripple except for you!”

Raven shook himself off and proceeded past the building where the men were housed. The biggest cabin had been designed like a bunkhouse to provide a permanent place for the workers. Cots were strewn around a huge area and a stove sat in the center of the building. Next to it was the main hotel, a structure designed for twenty guests, along with a kitchen and dining area where everyone ate. There was also a parlor with a huge fireplace. A huge porch wrapped around the front and side of the hotel where guests could sit and enjoy mother nature. Several cabins scattered throughout the grounds gave others more privacy.

Peg Leg stayed in the water for another few minutes contemplating Raven’s

words. Was he the one at fault here? Wasn't he giving himself a chance to be happy? He growled, throwing on his wooden leg without even thinking. The mineral waters always made the stump so relaxed. It did wonders for his pain, even though a lot of the aches had gone away since he'd been soaking his leg in the pool every day.

Daylight was starting to break. The mountain peaks hovered over the backdrop of the land, the dark pines scattered against those huge mountains like shadows that covered the harsh land of the Montana Territory. Raven was right about one thing. He was starting to think of this place as home.

"When is the new cook getting here?" Pops grumbled when Peg Leg made his way into the hotel's kitchen. "I got cooking to do at the ranch and now cooking here, too. Now, mind you, I don't mind feeding you men, especially since you worked hard putting this place up, but by the time I get to both places, I need a dog-gone nap! A man can't work like a horse and not get a break!"

Raven was at the table having a cup of coffee. He had poured one for Peg Leg as well, leaving it sitting at an empty spot. Peg Leg made his way to the table, his cane making a thumping noise along the floor. "I told you before we can ride over to the ranch for breakfast. You are the one who insisted on breaking in the new kitchen here!"

Pops didn't have much to say after that. Peg Leg and Raven grinned at each other, knowing Pops liked to complain more than anything else. He didn't mind being here at all. As a matter of fact, he probably loved it.

The other three men stumbled in, giving Pops a pat on the shoulder. "Can't wait to taste those flapjacks. You made us some eggs, too? Man, you're the best, Pops!"

"Get you some coffee, boy and have a seat. This food won't stay hot all day."

Creed grinned, grabbing a cup and pouring it with coffee. Blaze and Rider followed suit. All three men sat at the table, anxiously awaiting the plates of pancakes Pops was about to serve.

"Judge and Preacher rode out this morning before daylight," one of the men mentioned.

"Where are they going?" Raven asked.

Peg Leg nodded when Pops set down two large platters filled with flapjacks. The men dug in, making all kinds of noise as they filled their plates and poured syrup from the tin cup, passing it to the next man like clock work. "They got an idea there's still gold left in some of the gold mines up yonder. They're going to see if they can dig them some gold."

The others laughed. Miners in Nevada City had moved on years ago. There was nothing left according to the men who moved to the next big bust.

Blaze shoved a forkful of flapjacks in his mouth, then tried to talk. He always did everything loud and proud. Blaze didn't care what anyone thought. He always got the job done, no matter how much he destroyed to do so. "According to Preacher, they'd rather mine for gold without others getting in their way. I told 'em to head up to the Black Hills where the rush is on to mine that area, but they'd rather not."

Peg Leg shook his head. "Judge and Preacher are not fond of people. They'd rather stay to themselves. Guess it's their right to do whatever they want. They've sure been through enough over the years."

The other men agreed. The room was quiet while they finished their meal. Peg Leg figured each man was thinking about his days in the war. It was something a man found hard to get over, no matter where they were. It would always be a battle for them. Hopefully, they'd each be able to move on like Abel had done. He had been there commander back in those days. In a way he still was. Peg Leg wasn't surprised at all when he chose working as a sheriff over owning a ranch. But, that was another story in itself.

Chairs scraped the floors as each man finished up and headed back out to the grounds. There was still a ton of work to do, and each man knew their job. Mostly, it was outside work since the inside of the buildings were done. There was an area they wanted to clear to provide a picnic area for the guests.

"Cal told me the cook was going to arrive this week. It's already Wednesday and he's still not here. I told Cal if he soon don't show up, he'd better hire another man because I'm not doing this for too much longer."

"Are you back to grumbling again, Pops?" Peg Leg was alone at the table, finishing up his coffee. There was no reason to hurry outside since today was his accounting day. He had to provide Cal with a list of the inventory for the next month. In order to run the hotel properly, they'd need provisions. Opening day was in less than a week.

Pops laughed. "I guess it's in my nature to grumble. Now I guess I'll have to make you a list of stables this kitchen will need since the new cook isn't here to do so. I've tried to stock up, but you men eat like there's no tomorrow so we're running low."

Peg Leg shook his head, knowing Pops was kidding. He hoped the new cook would understand the older man's sense of humor. It wasn't really humor, but Peg Leg didn't know what else to call it. "It would be nice if he'd show up sooner than later. He was supposed to be here a few days ago. Not sure what's holding him up. Cal got a telegram that said he'd be a day or two late coming in. Hopefully, not by too many days. We're all set to open up next Saturday."

"I see you already have six guests coming in. How'd you get so many before we even open?" Pops asked.

Peg Leg pointed to his head. "I used my brains, Pops. I not only advertised for a cook, housekeeper and groundsman, I sent a bunch of advertisements to city papers from here to the east coast. For a fee, we offered a complete package including train, stagecoach and meals for a week-long stay at our affordable resort."

"That's using your smarts, son. I have a feeling this will be a huge success."

"Thanks, Pops."

"It's time for me to go over my ledger so I can give an accounting to Cal. If you can get me a list of provisions, I'll get it approved today and go into town myself to pick up what we need for the opening. After that, the cook can take over."

"I'm working on it right now. I've got it all in my head, and you can write it down since I can't write. What's this cook's name?"

"Joe Johnson. He's coming from Pennsylvania."

Pops looked up. "Didn't you say you were from Pennsylvania, Peg Leg?"

He nodded. "From a tiny rural town called Union Station. Used to be called Bucher's Thal named after the founder, Hans Bucher. But then the train came through and they changed the name. I remember playing on those tracks as a kid. We always got run off by the owner of the feed mill next door. I haven't been back there since the war took me away."

"That's a shame. Do you still have some family left, son?"

"No, they're all gone, Pops. My Pa and brother died in the war. Soon after, Ma passed away. No sense going back."

"No girl there waiting on you?"

"No, no one." Although, a memory struck him full force in the face. Josephine's wide, frightened eyes right before the raging water from the bridge collapse almost swept her away.

Pops scrutinized him. "Uh-huh! Looks like you were all starry-eyed for a minute. Who are you thinking about?"

"Not you too, Pops. I'm not starry-eyed. I was thinking about my childhood, and a few kids that hung out with me. We'd sneak off and play at the railroad and along the covered bridge."

"Uh-huh," he repeated, then got busy cleaning up.

Peg Leg stood and stretched one good leg. There was no sense in looking back. Life was not going that way. It was moving forward and he planned to move with it. Opening this hot springs resort was going to change his life, give him something to live for, to make him feel worthy. A man had to have some pride. This was his last shot.

A horse and rider caught his attention as it came down the newly formed road. He glanced out the window to see a woman, thin and frail-looking slide from the saddle. She swung a sack over her shoulder and adjusted a wide-brimmed hat over her brow. Her hair was long and flowed down her back in waves, which was unusual. Taking a step or two in the direction of the mineral waters, she stopped at the edge of the water and stared at it for a few moments. Then, as if she needed the reprieve from the long ride here, her shoulders went back and she followed the path to the hotel.

"I believe we have a visitor," Peg Leg told Pops when the sound of the front door opened. A small jingle from the bell attached above resonated through the parlor.

Pops shrugged. "Probably looking for a position here. Been getting them on and off for about a week now. Just take their name and location and start a list, Peg Leg. That way if Joe doesn't show up, we can hire another cook."

"No need," a feminine voice said. Her face was partially hidden by the wide brim of her hat, it's front tipped down so it was hard to see her face. She set the sack on

the floor in the kitchen and clamped her two hands together and smiled.

Peg Leg had just set his cup in the wash basin and turned around. The woman's huge smile caught him off guard. There was something slightly familiar about it.

She pulled the hat from her head, opened her arms and came forward to stand in front of him. "No need," she repeated. "I'm here, ready to cook away!"

He stared. Hard. There were no words. Who in the blazes was she? "We are waiting for Joe Johnson," he told her.

She blinked.

He blinked too. Those eyes, they sucked him right in, making him want to pay close attention. He could not and did not look away.

"Why, hello, Zebadiah Harris! I'm your new cook, Josephine Johnson!"

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